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Preview

Suddenly Whispersong remembered the dream she'd had a quarter-moon ago, when she'd realized that something terrible was happening back home. Were her Clanmates alright? Dread crept through her fur. Had there been a battle? With DayClan? With foxes? Or with badgers? Whispersong shuddered. Had any cats *died*?

Please let them all be okay, she prayed to StarClan.

Homesickness washed over her, and she closed her eyes in sadness, but it was soon replaced by fear. What if the danger was on its way right now? How would she and Echoheart know when to return to help? Whispersong let out a ragged breath, and her body shook. They needed to figure everything out about the prophecy as quickly as they could, so they could make their way home. The danger could arrive soon.

But how much longer did they have?

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This story is based on the *Warriors* world created by Erin Hunter. I do not own *Warriors*, but the names in the story are my own. Do not copy any parts of this story without permission.

Thank you, and enjoy reading!

Allegiances

DawnClan

Leader: ***Eveningstar***- large gray tom with tan flecks and a white underbelly

Deputy: ***Sunfur***- orange-brown she-cat with black flecks and long black-tipped tail

Medicine cat: ***Goldheart***- vibrant orange tabby tom with light orange eyes

*Apprentice: Yellowpaw

Warriors:

Bronzepelt- dark red-orange tom with lighter muzzle and yellow eyes

Clovertail- black-furred she-cat with green eyes

Creekfall- pale silver tabby tom with gray-green eyes

Eaglefeather- long-haired dark brown- and black-furred tom with yellow eyes

Echoheart- mottled dark gray she-cat with bright blue eyes

Gravelpelt- dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Hailstorm- dark gray tom with a white underbelly and blue eyes

Meadowheart- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with amber eyes

Moonshine- white she-cat with silver flecks and pale green eyes

Prairiefoot- pale orange tabby tom with pale green eyes

Rustypelt- long-haired gray-brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Sparktail- red-brown she-cat with darker flecks, fluffy tail, and brown eyes

Sparrowtail- brown tabby she-cat with thin black stripes and white underbelly

Whispersong- light gray tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Apprentices:

Raypaw- large orange tabby tom with orange eyes

Yellowpaw- light orange tabby she-cat with white muzzle and green eyes

Queens:

Aspenleaf- cream-furred she-cat with pale green eyes (mother of Creekfall's kits: *Pinekit*- dark brown tabby tom-kit with white underbelly, *Rosekit*- cream-furred she-kit, and *Needlekit*- pale silver tabby tom-kit)

Sagetail- cream-furred she-cat with blue-gray eyes (mother of Bronzepelt's kits: *Cherrykit*- fluffy red she-kit, and *Lilackit*- dark tortoiseshell she-kit)

Elders:

Copperleaf- orange-brown tom with darker brown muzzle and ears

Spruceclaw- dark brown tom with lighter brown underbelly and yellow eyes

Twilightfoot- large black tom with white muzzle, underbelly, and paws

DayClan

Leader: ***Rainstar***- white she-cat with black patches and icy-blue eyes

Deputy: ***Bristlepine***- mottled gray-brown tabby tom with white chest and muzzle

*Apprentice: Flamepaw

Medicine cat: ***Lilyfoot***- white she-cat with dark gray and light brown tabby patches

*Apprentice: Fernpaw

Warriors:

Applefang- red-orange tom with white muzzle and pale green eyes

Bumblefrost- large brown tabby tom with light green eyes

Clayfur- dark gray tabby tom with a lighter muzzle and gray eyes

Coalpelt- large black tom with yellow eyes

Foxfang- dark orange tabby tom with white muzzle and orange eyes

Hawktuft- dark brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Songtail- gray-brown tabby she-cat with white underbelly, muzzle, and paws

*Apprentice: Emberpaw

Weedfoot- small light brown tabby tom with teal eyes

*Apprentice: Stormpaw

Apprentices:

Fernpaw- small white tom with a red and black tabby tail

Flamepaw- orange-brown tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Emberpaw- long-haired red tom with a cream muzzle and brown eyes

Stormpaw- black- and white-patched she-cat with green eyes

Queens:

Frostwhisker- white she-cat with pale blue-gray eyes

DuskClan

Leader: ***Orangestar***- ginger- and white-patched tom with orange eyes

Deputy: ***Falconflight***- mottled light brown and dark brown tabby tom

Medicine cat: ***Crystalheart***- white she-cat with bright blue eyes

Warriors:

Blizzardclaw- large white tom with yellow eyes

Mushroomcloud- pale brown she-cat with a darker face and tail

Pantherclaw- large black tom with dark amber eyes

Petalheart- white she-cat with pale orange stripes and teal eyes

Raccoontail- long-haired white tom with dark brown tabby tail and brown ears

Snowfall- silver and black tabby she-cat with white muzzle and underbelly

Queens:

Gingerfur- dark ginger and white she-cat (mother of Orangestar's kits)

Elders:

Fallingrain- dark gray tabby tom with teal eyes

NightClan

Leader: ***Beechstar***- pale ginger tabby tom with teal eyes

Deputy: ***Mapleleaf***- ginger tom with dark orange eyes

*Apprentice: Flowerpaw

Medicine cat: ***Icedapple***- pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Warriors:

Duckflight- brown tabby tom with lighter flecks, cream muzzle, and green eyes

Cliffsand- pale ginger she-cat with light blue eyes

Goosefur- dark brown tabby tom with white underbelly and dark green eyes

Pebbletail- black- and white-patched she-cat with a fluffy tail

Robintail- black tom with orange patches

Swantail- long-haired white she-cat with a fluffy tail

*Apprentice: Ripplepaw

Apprentices:

Flowerpaw- long-haired cream-furred she-cat with darker muzzle and ears

Ripplepaw- long-haired gray tabby tom with fluffy white chest and a bushy tail

Queens:

Larksong- small dark brown tabby she-cat with black stripes (mother of *Violetkit*, and foster mother of *Darkkit* and *Shadowkit*)

Tribe of Rushing Water

Healer: ***Teller of the Pointed Stones (Stoneteller)***- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Prey-hunters:

Fade of Light at Dusk (Fade)- pale gray she-cat with white paws

Flower that Grows from Soil (Flower)- orange tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Leaf that Falls from Tree (Leaf)- long-haired orange- and black-patched tom

Rain that Falls from Sky (Rain)- silver tabby she-cat with gray-blue eyes

Cave-guards:

Moth that Flies at Night (Moth)- dark gray tom with dark orange eyes

Screech of Flying Eagle (Screech)- dark brown tom with yellow eyes

To-bes:

Crevice of Deep Cave (Crevice)- dark gray tom with pale green eyes

Dawn of New Day (Dawn)- ginger and white tabby she-cat with green eyes

Feather of Bird in Flight (Feather)- white she-cat with black patches

Owl of Dark Night (Owl)- black tom with yellow eyes

Star that Shines Bright (Star)- silver she-cat with one blue and one green eyes

Kit-mothers:

Moss that Covers Boulders (Moss)- brown- and black-patched she-cat

Seed of Dancing Dandelion (Seed)- cream tabby she-cat

Prologue

At first there was nothing. An orange tabby tom stared into the darkness, eyes narrowed. Silence rang in his ears.

He blinked and suddenly he was in a thin forest. It was dark; the bare branches of the trees above him reached out like threatening claws. The tom felt fear building inside him like a storm, and he looked back down cautiously.

In front of him lay a puddle. He walked closer, curiosity pulling him further. He carefully peered into the small pool of water and found that, even though no ripples raced along its surface, his reflection was uneven. He couldn't even make out that it was himself. He lowered his muzzle toward it, and, as he got closer, it became even more blurry.

Then he heard a voice around him, low and distant. "The days to come will be like your broken reflection."

The orange tom jerked his head around in confusion. But no one was there.

"Everything you see isn't always what it seems. You must learn trust anew, and learn to not be blinded by tradition. Ties will be cut, loyalty will be divided, and hatred will rise," the voice continued, and the orange tabby tom shivered. "The storm will break free of the rain and find its new dawn. A ray of light will see through the storm and find truth, and you must do the same. If not, the rain will destroy you."

Rain? Destroy us? But... The tom narrowed his eyes and looked around him, confusion and fear churning in his stomach.

Suddenly the orange tabby was swallowed by a cold blackness, and he found himself in a dark pine forest. Crimson blood splattered the undergrowth as an eerie wailing and screeching filled the air.

A cat flashed across his vision, hissing something that sounded like a warning. "Help! Help us!" the cat yelped in terror.

Something was wrong.

"GOLDHEART!"

Suddenly Goldheart's eyes flew open, straining against the bright light of the moon reflecting off of the Moonfall. His thoughts immediately flashed back to the dream. *I need to get home! Something bad is happening!*

He rushed over to his Clanmates and shook them awake. Raypaw blinked open his orange eyes and opened his mouth in question, but Goldheart slapped his tail over the young tom's mouth. He gave him a stern look; they were not allowed to talk until they were outside of the cave.

Then Goldheart dashed across the cave to wake Bronzepelt, who had the same confused look in his yellow eyes as Raypaw had. Goldheart turned to leave, sprinting away from the dim light of the Moonfall and hearing his Clanmates' pawsteps echoing behind him. Dread crept through his body. What was happening back at camp?

Once out of the Moonfall tunnel, Bronzepelt blurted out in worry, "What's going on, Goldheart? It's still dark!"

"Something's wrong! I had a dream. We need to get back to camp now."

That was all it took. Soon the three of them were sprinting down Star Mountain, racing restlessly through the dark night to get home.

Goldheart narrowed his eyes in determination.

DawnClan needs me.

Chapter 1

Hailstorm opened his eyes. He tried to move, but stiffness washed over him and pain shot through his shoulder. Memories of the recent battle with DayClan flooded back to him.

"Shh, you still need to rest." Hailstorm turned and saw a silver and white tabby she-cat crouching over him. "Does it hurt?" The NightClan medicine cat, Icedapple, asked.

"A bit," he coughed, turning to lick his injured shoulder.

"No! Don't," she told him urgently. "I put herbs there. I don't want you to lick them all off."

Hailstorm turned his head and rested it back on the nest. He inhaled deeply. Then he jerked his head back up. "Where's Clovertail?"

"She's fine," Icedapple assured him.

"Where is she?"

"Outside. With Tw—" She cut herself off and turned to him, staring at him sympathetically through her pale blue eyes. "I'm so sorry, Hailstorm."

"What?" Hailstorm asked, worry creeping along his spine.

"I... I shouldn't be the one to tell you," the young medicine cat murmured, turning away. "I'm not sure if you remember last night..."

"Of course I do," Hailstorm snapped. Did she think he was *that* mouse-brained? The strain during the battle with DayClan still exhausted him. How *could* he forget it?

"You remember *everything* ?" Icedapple asked quietly, her eyes full of sadness.

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes in confusion.

Then it hit him; he knew what Icedapple had been trying to tell him. His mind flashed to last night. A dusty brown shape had lain motionless in the blood-stained grass, pale green eyes glazed over. His heart lurched.

Twigfoot.

"It's *t-true* then? I thought that... but... I was exhausted... I was dreaming. I th—" he cut his sentence off as his eyes misted. "He's *gone* ?"

Icedapple's voice cracked. "I'm so sorry."

"Who... who else?" Hailstorm choked, feeling the tears pool in his eyes. Had any of his other Clanmates died? No. They couldn't have. They just *couldn't.*

Icedapple sighed, then began, "Ravenheart... that black queen that had been guarding the nursery," Icedapple murmured quietly.

Hailstorm's thoughts flickered to the NightClan queen in the nursery, fighting to protect her newborn kits. Now she was dead; and her kits were motherless. "Who'll take care of her kits?" he asked shakily.

"Larksong will," Icedapple meowed distantly, sighing. "Darkkit and Shadowkit will never know their mother; they'll always know Larksong as their mother and Violetkit, Larksong's kit, as their sister," Icedapple added sadly.

Hailstorm stared ahead blankly.

"Heatpool and Burningwood were killed too," Icedapple continued, and Hailstorm nodded bitterly. Those two fox-hearts deserved it. "Brownear..." Hailstorm lowered his gaze. The gentle NightClan warrior needn't have died, however. "Greenwood who was an elder..." Icedapple murmured, then she paused, and a tear dripped onto the floor. "And... and... Bushtail."

"Bushtail?" Hailstorm echoed in horror. *Who would kill a medicine*

cat?

Icedapple nodded slowly.

"You're... you're a great medicine cat, Icedapple. He taught you lots. You'll make him proud," Hailstorm meowed, though his voice sounded hollow.

Icedapple's eyes shone with grief. "I don't know what to do without him."

Hailstorm laid his head back down on the moss. He would let Icedapple grieve in peace. He looked back up at her. "Can I... can I join my Clanmates?"

Icedapple nodded. "Be careful, though."

"I will," Hailstorm promised her solemnly. He shakily got to his paws and wobbled out of the brambles that were the medicine cats den. He blinked away the bright morning light and, as his eyes adjusted, he saw Twigfoot's body, limp and scarred, surrounded by his Clanmates. Hailstorm walked forward as if in a trance.

He shed no tears; nothing. He felt only emptiness.

Moonshine sobbed into her mate's fur, and Clovertail leaned against her. Eaglefeather, Creekfall, and Twilightfoot parted for Hailstorm to pass through. He nodded distractedly at them, soon reaching his father's body. His paws trembled as the tang of death reached his nose.

Already? he thought with sadness. And suddenly, like a breaking storm, the tears spilled over. Sobs shook his shoulders. *Why?* he yowled silently to StarClan. *Why?*

He was vaguely aware of Clovertail pulling him closer. He succumbed, burying his face in his sister's shoulders like a kit. All those memories. Times spent in the forest hunting with his father. Gone. Sharing meals and telling stories. Gone. Even sleeping beside him. Gone. Everything was gone. Snatched away from him within heartbeats. *Gone*.

Prairiefoot was there, and Sparrowtail beside Sunfur. Gravelpelt stood rigid. Moonshine sobbed harder. But Hailstorm didn't notice them.

Time passed. He didn't know how long, but he felt the shadows creeping away from them as the sun rose upward.

Someone nudged his fur. Hailstorm turned away from Clovertail and blinked away the tears. Cliffsand dropped a thrush at his paws, her blue eyes full of sorrow. Hailstorm stared blankly at the prey, nothing registering in his thoughts.

"Thank you," Rustypelt meowed quietly, voice filled with mourning.

The NightClan warrior nodded in understanding at Hailstorm, then backed away to join her Clanmates beside their fallen cats. Hailstorm watched her go, her pale ginger fur still matted with blood. She sat beside Flowerpaw and Ripplepaw, leaning over Brownear, Ravenheart, and Bushtail. Icedapple joined them, murmuring quietly and looking up at the sky. Then Beechstar joined in, nosing his Clanmates' fur before telling two NightClan elders to arrange a burial.

Hailstorm heard Blizzardclaw and Gingerfur meow their goodbyes to the NightClan leader, wishing all of NightClan luck. Beechstar and Mapleleaf dipped their heads and murmured gratefully to the DuskClan patrol. Then, with that, the DuskClan cats left.

Hailstorm heard Sunfur say something to Rustypelt, and he turned his head as Sunfur approached Mapleleaf, telling him that they had to get back to camp. Mapleleaf dipped his head and meowed his thanks to her. Sunfur nodded in return, then padded back to her Clanmates. "Let's go," she meowed half-heartedly. "Can... can some of you carry him?" she asked quietly, pointing to Twigfoot's unmoving body. "I'll take the lead."

Moonshine shook her head, grief-stricken. Prairiefoot and Rustypelt stepped forward, and Creekfall meowed solemnly, "I'll help."

Sunfur blinked, then headed for the NightClan camp entrance. Moonshine followed slowly, body shaking. Clovertail raced after

her, and Hailstorm was right behind her, supporting their weakened mother. Hailstorm heard Rustypelt, Creekfall, and Prairiefoot grunt with effort as their exhausted bodies lifted Twigfoot and carried him forward. Twilightfoot limped beside Eaglefeather, still breathing hard. The older tom's flanks heaved, and Eaglefeather leaned against him to give him support. Sparrowtail was on Twilightfoot's other side, and together she and her brother helped the senior warrior through the forest.

Hailstorm put one paw in front of the other, muscles burning like fire. His breathing was ragged, and his whole body shook with anguish and exhaustion.

Soon a roaring filled his ears, and he glanced up to find the patrol near the Thunderpath. Clovertail let out a few shallow breaths, and Moonshine moaned in sadness. Sunfur led them confidently to the edge of the hard gravel path and meowed, "Let's get Twigfoot across first."

Rustypelt, Creekfall, and Prairiefoot nodded, slowly setting the deputy's body down so they could rest. Sunfur stared down both ends of the Thunderpath, light brown eyes narrowed in concentration. Her long brown and black-flecked tail twitched, and her large ears swiveled. Hailstorm was impressed with how calm she was; she lead the anguished patrol safely home.

"Okay, get ready," she told Rustypelt, Creekfall, and Prairiefoot. The three warriors grasped Twigfoot's body and looked ahead in determination. A monster flew past, sending up dust. Hailstorm closed his eyes as the wind from it ruffled his ragged fur.

"Now!" Sunfur yowled.

Creekfall jogged forward, Rustypelt and Prairiefoot behind him. They carried Twigfoot's body carefully above the Thunderpath, but they were going too slow.

"Faster!" Sunfur hollered, an oncoming monster drowning out her warning.

They all closed their eyes as the bright red monster raced past them.

Hailstorm slowly opened his eyes and saw, to his relief, Prairiefoot, Creekfall, and Rustypelt crouching in the middle of the Thunderpath, Twigfoot's fur still in their jaws. Their eyes were wide with terror and their fur stood on end. But they were alive.

"Keep going!" Sunfur's yowl snapped them back to their senses, and they quickly got to their paws and hurried to the other side, just as a monster raced toward them, going the other way. It sped past, right where the three warriors had been heartbeats before.

"Thank StarClan," Sunfur sighed in relief. "Okay, Sparrowtail and Eaglefeather, you next," she meowed to her grown kits. The two warriors nodded and stood at the edge of the Thunderpath, awaiting their mother's signal. "Go!" Sunfur hollered, and Sparrowtail dashed forward, Eaglefeather a pawstep behind her. They rushed onward, reaching the other side unharmed.

The Thunderpath was still silent, and Sunfur pricked her ears. Hailstorm looked back and forth across the gravel, but he heard and saw nothing.

Sunfur turned to Meadowheart and Gravelpelt. "You two go next." Gravelpelt and Meadowheart walked forward. A distant rumbling filled the air, and soon a dark gray monster sprinted past. "Now!" Sunfur ordered just as the monster disappeared around the corner.

Gravelpelt raced forward, dark gray tabby fur ripped and torn in places. Meadowheart leapt after him, her tortoiseshell and white fur stained with blood. As they leapt into the tall grass on the other side, in DawnClan territory, Eaglefeather rubbed his muzzle in Meadowheart's fur, and the two entwined their tails.

"Now you three." Hailstorm turned his attention toward Sunfur again and saw that she was motioning to him, Clovertail, and Moonshine. "Can you help her?" she asked Hailstorm and Clovertail quietly, nodding to the weakened white, silver-flecked warrior.

"I don't need help!" Moonshine snapped, her pale green eyes narrowed. She lifted her chin and stalked over to the Thunderpath.

Sunfur eyed her sadly, then looked at Hailstorm and Clovertail

expectantly.

"Don't worry," Clovertail whispered. "We'll take care of her." Hailstorm nodded in agreement, and Sunfur looked assured. He padded after his sister, standing with her beside Moonshine. Of course they'd watch out for their mother!

"Go!" Sunfur yelled.

Clovertail urged Moonshine forward, racing out onto the hard Thunderpath. Moonshine ran ahead, Clovertail by her side, and Hailstorm took up the rear. The hard surface of the Thunderpath stung against his already-torn pads. He winced with each pawstep, but pushed forward. Sooner than he expected, he found himself beside Gravelpelt and Prairiefoot again, safely on DawnClan territory once more.

Now the only cats remaining were Sunfur and Twilightfoot. Hailstorm watched as Sunfur encouraged the older tom, then nodded at him to go. The two raced alongside one another, Twilightfoot's limp slowing them.

A monster rumbled in the distance.

"Go!" Eaglefeather yowled, brown and black fur spiked.

Sunfur's brown eyes widened. She urged Twilightfoot on, the black and white tom's body trembling. Sunfur shoved him onward. She heaved as the monster approached faster. Twilightfoot hurtled forward out of the way of the monster. Sunfur bunched her muscles and leapt just as it reached them, missing her by a tail-length. Sunfur crouched over, panting, and helped Twilightfoot back to his paws. Together, the two warriors padded to their Clanmates, joining them in DawnClan territory once again.

"Let's keep going," Sunfur panted, helping Twilightfoot forward, both of their pelts spiked.

Soon, and with much relief, the patrol reached the stream, where the cats stopped to take a drink. Sunfur lead them upstream until they reached the log-bridge, and, one at a time, they crossed and

continued trekking through the forest. Soon Hailstorm spotted the Great Pine, and he felt energy stirring inside him; he wanted to get home so bad.

Sitting at the bramble entrance was Eveningstar. He rushed forward to greet them, stopping short when he saw Rustypelt, Prairiefoot, and Creekfall carrying Twigfoot's body. "What happened?" he gasped.

"Heatpool," Sunfur muttered in disgust, tears glistening in her eyes. "Ripplepaw and Duckflight weren't lying; the DayClan cats were fighting to kill. So we fought back with the same strength."

"And you *killed* them?" Eveningstar asked in disbelief. "But—"

"What did you want us to do? Be torn apart?" Creekfall grunted, turning to lick his injured leg. "*And* they killed Twigfoot," he choked. "We had to avenge him."

Eveningstar's eyes clouded with tears. "Well, then, come on. Get to Goldheart and Yellowpaw."

"Goldheart?" Meadowheart echoed. "But he's at the Moonfall, isn't he?"

Eveningstar blinked. "He had a dream. He explained it to me. It warned of danger and he hurried home immediately."

Sunfur nodded in relief. "Thank StarClan." Then she pointed to Twigfoot's body, blinking away tears. "We need to bury him."

"Let his Clanmates say their final farewells first," Eveningstar murmured sadly. "We'll set him in the clearing where every cat can say goodbye to him. Meanwhile, you need to see the medicine cats. First let me speak with them, then you can go get treatment."

Every cat nodded.

Eveningstar turned his head and walked into the medicine cats den. Hailstorm followed Rustypelt, Prairiefoot, and Creekfall slowly as they set Twigfoot in the clearing. Moonshine stumbled over to him, tears in her pale green eyes. Clovertail followed her, and together

they sat beside Twigfoot, their heads bowed in silence. Hailstorm laid down beside Clovertail and Moonshine, while the other warriors went to rest in their dens.

"Creekfall!" Hailstorm looked up to see Aspenleaf rushing out of the nursery, her three kits behind her. Creekfall ran towards his mate and rubbed his muzzle into her cream fur. Their three kits licked Creekfall, climbing all over him.

"You smell like blood!" Needlekit mewled worriedly, backing away from him.

"What's Twigfoot laying down for?" Pinekit asked, gazing across the clearing.

"He's probably really tired from that battle. Goldheart will fix him up," meowed Rosekit.

Aspenleaf and Creekfall exchanged a grief-stricken glance. "Let's go back to the nursery," Aspenleaf urged. Pinekit and Rosekit followed their mother, batting at each other playfully on the way there. Creekfall padded after them, then turned his head. Needlekit was staring at Twigfoot, his eyes wide.

"Come on, Needlekit," Creekfall meowed, with a worried edge to his voice.

Needlekit turned to his father. "Twigfoot isn't going to wake up, is he?"

Creekfall sighed. "No, son," he murmured.

Needlekit's amber eyes filled with worry.

"Come on, let's go. You're too young to deal with this grief," Creekfall meowed sadly.

Needlekit followed his father back to the nursery, head bowed and paws dragging.

Hailstorm turned sadly back to Twigfoot and watched as Clovertail and Moonshine fell asleep, ragged bodies pressed against

Twigfoot's. Hailstorm felt a tear roll down his cheek, and he closed his eyes, burying his face in his father's fur. Hailstorm sat in silence, sobs shaking his shoulders.

Then his ears pricked. He heard muttering coming from the medicine cats den, and he angled his ears toward it.

"...and you need to appoint a new deputy, before moonhigh," Goldheart was meowing.

"Oh, why did Twigfoot have to die?" Had that wailing come from Eveningstar?

There was a silence.

"Oh!" Yellowpaw's surprised meow filled the air. "*That's* what the dream meant!"

"The dream?" Eveningstar echoed in both surprise and annoyance.

Goldheart sighed. "She had a dream, and it was about this battle; I realized it last night Yellowpaw." Goldheart sighed. "But there's nothing more to worry about from it. I mean, it already pass—"

"But that was only *part* of it," Yellowpaw interrupted, then she added solemnly, "I... I think it also meant that DawnClan would soon have a new deputy."

"What?" Eveningstar demanded.

Hailstorm twitched his ear in confusion.

"The sticks, shaped like paws," Yellowpaw's voice faltered, and she paused. "Twigs in the shape of feet. Twigfoot."

Realization hit Hailstorm like lightning and he widened his eyes.

"They were all broken, and... I think that was a warning from StarClan. But now since Twigfoot... died... DawnClan needs a new deputy," Yellowpaw meowed.

"But who?" Eveningstar asked miserably. "Twigfoot was a great

deputy."

"The dream said that too," Yellowpaw whispered.

"The dream *said* which warrior will replace Twigfoot?" Eveningstar sounded surprised. "But it's a leader's choice."

Goldheart burst out in understanding, "The sun. At the end."

Yellowpaw replied, "Yes. It means Sunfur, I think."

"She *did* bring the exhausted and anguished cats back safely," Eveningstar meowed, sounding as if he agreed with what the medicine cats had said.

"You should give this some thought though," Goldheart warned. "No matter how much influence this dream has had, it's still *your* choice." Then he paused. "Now, I have injured cats to treat."

Eveningstar soon left the medicine cats den, and Hailstorm hid his face in Clovertail's black fur so that Eveningstar didn't suspect that he'd been eavesdropping. Once the DawnClan leader had left, disappearing inside his stone den, Hailstorm looked up again. Voices still echoed inside the medicine cats den.

"I'm proud of you, Yellowpaw," Goldheart was meowing quietly. "You acted well while I was away, like a true medicine cat."

"Thank you, Goldheart," Yellowpaw meowed. Even though her voice was filled with pride, sorrow was hidden underneath it; Hailstorm could tell she was grieving for their father, but was trying to be strong for the sake of the Clan.

"So," Goldheart continued, "at the next half-moon, we will have your full-medicine-cat naming ceremony, and we'll present you to StarClan as a full medicine cat."

Hailstorm couldn't mistake the shock in his sister's voice as she exclaimed, "Really? Oh, Goldheart, thank you!"

"You've earned it," Goldheart replied matter-of-factly. "You've been a great apprentice; a great medicine cat. And you'll continue being

great even after I've joined StarClan." Then he added, "But don't worry. I'm not going anywhere just yet. Not for a while."

Yellowpaw was silent, then she asked, "Should I start rounding up the injured cats?"

"Yes," Goldheart meowed solemnly. "I'll get the herbs ready."

Yellowpaw dashed out of the den, and soon Hailstorm heard her turn and approach him. Had she found out he'd been listening to their conversation? But Yellowpaw just sat silently beside Hailstorm and bowed her head over Twigfoot. "I'll never forget you, father. You served your Clan well, and I'm sorry I couldn't serve you in return." Then she closed her eyes and licked Twigfoot's fur. She turned and looked at Hailstorm, Clovertail, and Moonshine. Yellowpaw sighed sadly then licked each of their heads. Hailstorm felt warmth spread through him as Yellowpaw's tongue rasped over the top of his head. He looked up at her and slowly opened his eyes, pretending that he'd just woken up.

Yellowpaw sighed. "How are you feeling, Hailstorm?" she asked. "You've got cuts and gashes all over your fur. Come with me."

Hailstorm nodded and got to his paws, following his sister shakily to the medicine cats den. "Goldheart, Hailstorm needs to be cleaned up. And he needs goldenrod."

Goldheart turned around. "Come here," he ordered Hailstorm, turning back to his store of herbs to gather the ones he needed.

"I'll be back," Yellowpaw called over her shoulder as she left the den in search of more warriors who needed treatment.

Goldheart turned back to Hailstorm and looked him over, muttering to himself. Then he meowed, "I need to make a poultice. In the meantime, lick all that blood and dust from your fur." Hailstorm obeyed and began to wash his gray and white fur clean of debris. He bit at the knots, spitting out the clots of dried blood.

Goldheart soon turned back to him. "That's much better," the medicine cat nodded in approval, then turned to gather his mixture

of herbs. "This will sting," he warned.

Hailstorm nodded and closed his eyes, bracing himself.

Just then his mind flashed back to the time he was here before, with Echoheart. He was still a kit, and she was a young apprentice. He sat in this very spot, watching as Goldheart pressed herbs to his cuts and sprained paw after he'd fallen in the stream. Then the memory was gone; but the little moment with Echoheart made him happy. He opened his eyes and turned to Goldheart, whose eyes were full of confusion.

"You didn't even flinch," the medicine cat murmured. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Hailstorm assured the orange tom. "Why?"

"I already put the herbs on, and you didn't move."

Hailstorm blinked. "I didn't?"

Goldheart shook his head.

"Well, I was thinking of Echoheart," he confessed. "A memory of her came to me as I closed my eyes."

Goldheart chuckled. "Loves a curious thing, isn't it?"

Hailstorm looked down at his paws in embarrassment, then asked, "But, how would you know? You're not allowed to have a mate and kits."

"That doesn't mean I don't know *how* to love," Goldheart meowed. "I loved my parents. I love Yellowpaw. I care about you all; you're all like my kits," he laughed.

Hailstorm smiled weakly. It was the first time he'd smiled in what felt like forever.

Just then Yellowpaw came walking into the den, with Moonshine, Clovertail, Prairiefoot, and Twilightfoot behind her. Goldheart glanced up at his Clanmates and meowed, "Worst injuries first.

That'd be you, Twilightfoot. Yellowpaw"" he turned to his apprentice,""Can you treat Prairiefoot and Moonshine? I've got Twilightfoot and Clovertail."

Yellowpaw nodded. "Come here, Moonshine," she soothed. Moonshine walked forward slowly, a distant look in her pale green eyes. Yellowpaw sat her down, gently resting her tail on their mother's white and gray-flecked flank. She then began murmuring something quietly to her, and licked her wounds soothingly. Moonshine's eyes closed and she sighed in relaxation.

Hailstorm watched Yellowpaw. *She sure knows how to make cats feel better.* Pride for his sister filled his body and he watched as she gently pressed herbs to their mother's wounds. Moonshine winced but said nothing.

"Hailstorm?" Hailstorm turned to look at Goldheart, who was treating Twilightfoot without looking up. "Can you tell the other injured cats to come and see Yellowpaw and I after these four are done here?" he motioned to the injured cats sitting in the den.

Hailstorm nodded absentmindedly.

Before he could leave, Goldheart called,"I need you to come back later, Hailstorm. I still need to finish treating you, but we need to treat the worst wounds on everyone first."

Hailstorm nodded again and padded out of the den. His eyes caught his father's body, and another wave of anguish washed over him. His heart felt torn again. Raypaw was sitting with Twigfoot now. He was quietly murmuring something to his dead mentor, eyes closed in sorrow. Hailstorm slowly walked over to him and rested his tail on his friend's back. Raypaw didn't move. Hailstorm cast a sidelong glance at the light orange tom, then backed away slowly, leaving him to mourn in silence.

Hailstorm dragged his paws across the ground all the way to the warriors' den. He stepped inside and saw Eaglefeather and Meadowheart curled up together, pelts still stained and matted with dried blood. Sparrowtail sat in the corner, licking her paws. Her brown eyes were full of exhaustion and sleepiness. She glanced up

wearily as she heard Hailstorm at the den entrance.

"Goldheart wants me to tell you to make sure and see him before the day is over. Twilightfoot, Moonshine, Clovertail, and Prairiefoot are in there right now," Hailstorm meowed quietly and sorrowfully, and he noticed that the words coming out of his mouth sounded unlike his own voice.

Sparrowtail nodded, getting to her paws. She shook her brown and black striped pelt, her white muzzle and belly fur full of blood and scratches. "I'll tell Sunfur and Rustypelt. They're sitting outside."

"Okay," he replied quietly, heading slowly to the nursery to tell Creekfall.

As he stepped inside, he heard tiny mewling and loud scuffling of the kits playing. Rosekit was play fighting with Lilackit and Cherrykit, while Pinekit stalked them from behind Sagetail. Needlekit, however, was lying in the corner, head on his paws and eyes staring distantly at the other side of the nursery. Creekfall sat beside him, soothing him. Hailstorm guessed he was still thinking of Twigfoot's death. Hailstorm sighed and shook the thought away before the tears could start flowing.

Aspenleaf looked up as she heard Hailstorm. "Yes?" she asked, the usual sweetness gone from her voice as anguish replaced it.

"Creekfall needs to see Goldheart and Yellowpaw by the end of the day. They just wanted me to tell him."

Aspenleaf nodded and glanced at her mate. She sighed. "I'll tell him," she promised.

Hailstorm nodded and turned half-heartedly.

As he left the nursery, he saw Spruceclaw and Copperleaf arguing with Eveningstar about hunting patrols.

"The Clan needs food," Spruceclaw was protesting.

"We weren't at the battle. Let us help," Copperleaf meowed. "We're not useless, you know. We can still hunt."

Eveningstar nodded. "I know you can. But we can get other cats—"

"Most everyone went to the battle," Spruceclaw pointed out.

"I guess I can go too," Eveningstar nodded thoughtfully.

"*You* need to figure out the deputy situation," Copperleaf sighed. "Let *us* do the hunting. The Clan is weakened. We *need* prey. The fresh-kill pile is dwindling as more cats take prey but no new prey is brought into camp."

"Yes. Just let us hunt. I hate to just sit and do nothing while every other cat is weak and injured," Spruceclaw murmured.

Eveningstar nodded and sighed. "Alright. You can take any other cats willing to go, after they've approved it with Goldheart," Eveningstar ordered the two elders.

They nodded then headed toward the warriors' den, looking for any cats fit to go. Eveningstar watched them, then slowly lumbered toward his den, stopping as he saw his deputy lying in the middle of the grassy clearing, with Moonshine asleep next to him. Twigfoot's dusky brown fur was sleek, and all blood and dust was cleaned. *Moonshine must have done that,* Hailstorm thought painfully.

Hailstorm watched Eveningstar step around Moonshine carefully and sit beside his fallen deputy. He nosed Twigfoot's fur in sadness, then he glanced up at the sun, rising straight above his head. Eveningstar's eyes softened and he murmured quietly, maybe to himself, or maybe to StarClan. Then he turned his head to the warriors' den, where Sunfur nodded to a few of the surrounding warriors.

"You two can lead one patrol," Sunfur told Copperleaf and Spruceclaw. "I'll lead another." The two elders nodded.

Hailstorm was impressed. Sunfur had volunteered to take a patrol, even though she had pretty bad wounds and must have been absolutely exhausted. Perhaps Yellowpaw had been right when she had said that the dream suggested Sunfur be the new deputy.

Hailstorm watched Raypaw volunteer to hunt, Bronzepelt and

Aspenleaf behind him. Sunfur nodded, dividing the cats up to two patrols. In the end, Sunfur's patrol had Raypaw and Aspenleaf, and Bronzepelt had joined Copperleaf and Spruceclaw's patrol. Together the two patrols left the camp, disappearing beyond the bramble barrier.

"Hailstorm?" Hailstorm jerked his head around. It was Clovertail. "Goldheart says that Moonshine needs to rest, but she won't let me take her away from Twigfoot." Clovertail sighed, shoulders sagging in grief.

Hailstorm turned his head and saw his mother, curled protectively around his father's body. Hailstorm felt a stab of pity claw his heart for Moonshine. Or was it for himself? Hailstorm felt his breathing become irregular again, and tears blurred his vision.

"I tried, but she wouldn't listen. Maybe you can convince her," Clovertail meowed sadly.

Hailstorm looked at his sister. "I don't... I don't know," he choked.

"Yellowpaw said that it would be best for her to go to her nest. Can't you at least *try* ?" Clovertail pleaded.

"Of course," he meowed quietly, staring into his sister's green eyes. Then he turned and padded slowly up to Moonshine, her white-furred shoulders shaking. "Mother?" he meowed.Moonshine didn't seem to hear him. Hailstorm bent down and prodded her flank gently with his front paw. Moonshine slowly lifted her head, eyes distant.

Hailstorm blinked. "Moonshine, Yellowpaw wants you to rest, in the warriors' den."

Moonshine didn't respond for several heartbeats, but then her eyes flashed and refocused again, narrowed menacingly. "How dare Yellowpaw? Does she want me to stay away from my mate?"

Hailstorm backed away in shock; she was worse than he thought. She needed treatment for her shock, and quickly. Hailstorm turned and raced away to the medicine cats den, passing Clovertail on the

way. Clovertail's eyes were clouded with worry for their mother, and she ran after Hailstorm.

"Goldheart?" Hailstorm called shakily.

Yellowpaw burst through the entrance. "Are you alright?" she asked worriedly.

"I'm fine," he meowed, though inside he felt awful. "But Moonshine isn't. She won't leave Twigfoot's side." Hailstorm sighed in sadness. But I don't blame her, he added in anguish, tears falling to the ground again.

Yellowpaw stared across the clearing at Moonshine.

Hailstorm glanced back and forth between his sisters. He bowed his head. "She got defensive when I told her that she needed to go to the warriors' den."

"It's not your fault," Yellowpaw murmured. "She's in shock." She looked sadly at the white shape of their mother entwined with Twigfoot's.

"Can't you give her something for shock?" Clovertail asked. "Like poppy seeds or something?"

"Yes, but she might refuse herbs," Yellowpaw sighed.

"It's worth a try, isn't it?" Hailstorm asked.

Yellowpaw nodded. "I guess I might as well try. If not, no harm done. You two can wait here." Yellowpaw turned and dashed into her den, meowing something to Goldheart.

Yellowpaw emerged heartbeats later with a poppy flower in her jaws. "Let's go," she muttered. Hailstorm and Clovertail followed their sister across the camp to Moonshine. Yellowpaw nodded to Clovertail to get Moonshine's attention, as their mother didn't seem to sense their approach.

"Mother?" Clovertail asked quietly.

Moonshine looked up, and her eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to my nest," she growled.

Yellowpaw stepped forward. "Here, have some poppy seeds; they'll help you feel better." She shook the poppy flower and a few small black seeds fell into the dirt.

Moonshine narrowed her eyes. "Poppy seeds," she murmured to herself. Then she looked up at Yellowpaw. "I'm not stupid," she snapped and flattened her ears. "I know those make cats sleepy." Then she turned away and scowled, "I can't believe my own kits would try and trick me."

Yellowpaw flinched as if she'd been clawed. She backed away, her usually bright green eyes now dull with hurt. Clovertail flattened her ears and Hailstorm looked at his mother, half angry at her and half sad for her.

"What are you staring at?" Moonshine growled, neck fur bristled and ears flattened.

Yellowpaw turned and fled, tears in her already misty eyes. Clovertail glared at Moonshine and raced after Yellowpaw. Moonshine stared after them, expression unchanging. Hailstorm sighed sadly and turned around, dashing after his sisters.

Would Moonshine ever be the strong, caring, and encouraging mother he'd once known? The one who'd curled around him on the cold nights when he was a kit? The one who'd licked his fur clean of dirt after a long day outside?

Hailstorm glanced over his shoulder at Moonshine and let out a ragged breath, the lump in his throat growing as his emotions swept over him. How would life go on without Twigfoot? Hailstorm's body trembled and his paws swayed beneath him. There seemed to be no hope left in his body. He let himself collapse on the ground, sobs shaking his shoulders and tears sliding down his face like claws raking through his heart.

Chapter 2

A loud roaring filled Echoheart's ears as she blinked open her eyes. Unfamiliar cats milled around her, busy in the early morning.

All the memories flooded back to her again. She, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost had found the mountain cats at last! They'd arrived here just two days ago, and the Tribe cats had taken them to the Tribe leader: the Teller of the Pointed Stones, or just Stoneteller. He had seemed pleased to see them, saying that he'd received a sign from the mountain cats' ancestors moons ago, and that they'd told him two foreign cats would soon find them. Echoheart had been shocked. *Another StarClan?* she had thought. *Another set of warrior ancestors?*

Echoheart shook her thoughts away and looked around her. Whispersong and Bumblefrost were sharing tongues a few tail-lengths away, while some of the Tribe cats goggled at them. They acted like they'd never seen another cat before! But then again, Echoheart realized, they *hadn't* ever seen a cat outside their Tribe before. No other cats lived here in the harsh weather. Just the Tribe of Rushing Water.

Echoheart yawned.

Whispersong turned and exclaimed, "You're awake, finally!"

Bumblefrost turned to her too. "Moth offered to take us on a hunting patrol, so that while we're here we can learn their ways."

Echoheart nodded. "Alright." Moth that Flies at Night had been one of the first mountain cats they'd met, along with Rain that Falls from Sky and Flower that Grows from Soil.

Echoheart turned to Bumblefrost. "When are we leaving?"

The DayClan warrior shrugged.

"I hope we'll be able to catch something," Whispersong murmured. "I don't want to look like we can't hunt, like we're weak and pathetic."

Bumblefrost licked her cheek. "I'm sure we will; we're *warriors*."

Suddenly Echoheart heard a loud squealing behind her, and she turned her head. Two black- and gray-patched kits were racing after each other, laughing as they tumbled across the stone floor.

"Night! Howl!" A brown- and black-patched she-cat was racing after the two kits, who'd crashed into a large, dark brown tom.

The brown tom chuckled. "Oh, don't worry about them, Moss. They're just kits, after all."

"I suppose," Moss sighed.

"Am I going to be a cave-guard like you, Screech?" one of the kits asked the brown tom.

Screech shrugged. "Stoneteller will decide at your to-be naming ceremony."

Cave-guard? To-be? Echoheart felt so confused.

"Come on," Moss told her two kits.

One of them followed, but the other stayed behind, staring up admiringly at Screech.

"Howl," Moss called, and edge to her voice.

"Yeah, Howl, come on," taunted the kit's sister. "I'm going to get to the den first!" Then she turned and raced ahead, her black and gray fur disappearing inside an inner cave.

"Night, that's not fair! You didn't say go!" Howl called, racing after his sister.

Moss shook her head and sighed, then followed her kits into the cave.

"Ready?"

Echoheart turned around at the voice and saw Moth, a large, thick-furred, dark gray tom with amber eyes.

"Yes," Whispersong replied, yawning as she arched her back in a stretch.

Bumblefrost nodded and got to his paws as well.

"Leaf and Star will be coming with us," Moth added.

Echoheart watched as two cats stepped forward. One was a long-haired orange- and black-splotched tom with a large bushy tail, and the other was a small, pale silver and white tabby she-cat, about the size of an older apprentice. Echoheart widened her eyes in shock as she saw that the pale silver she-cat had two different colored eyes; one was blue and the other was green.

"This is Leaf that Falls from Tree," Moth told the forest cats, pointing to the long-haired orange and black tom. "And this," he pointed to the silver she-cat with different-colored eyes, "is Star that Shines Bright."

The three Clan cats nodded at the two Tribe cats.

"And what are your names?" Star asked.

"Oh, Bumblefrost."

"I'm Whispersong."

"And I'm Echoheart."

The silver tabby she-cat tilted her head. "Are you prey-hunters or cave-guards in your Tribe?"

"They don't live in a Tribe," Moth told the young cat.

"They don't?" she exclaimed, eyes widening in shock.

"No." Whispersong shook her head. "What *are* cave-guards and

prey-hunters?"

"Let's get moving, then we'll tell you," Moth suggested.

"Yes, the Tribe needs food," Leaf grunted, then turned toward the waterfall at the cave entrance. Star followed, and Moth motioned for Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost to go next, while he took up the rear.

Echoheart watched in awe as the two mountain cats in front of her passed into the thin walkway between the cave wall and the spray of the waterfall, without getting wet. Bumblefrost went next, Whispersong close behind. Echoheart took a deep breath, then followed her sister out of the cave.

Sunlight glistened on the scattered patches of snow as Echoheart's eyes adjusted to the light. The river that came from the waterfall rushed down the mountain, splashing over the gray stone. A crisp wind buffeted Echoheart's gray and light brown fur, and she shivered. It felt refreshing after being in the cave for the past two days, but it was cold.

Leaf was scanning the sky, and Star was jumping in the snow, meowing in delight.

Moth padded up beside Echoheart. "Star is the youngest to-be, though she still acts like a kit." The dark gray tom chuckled.

"What *is* a to-be?" Bumblefrost asked.

"A young cat training to either be a cave-guard or a prey-hunter," Moth replied, looking at them with his dark amber eyes. "Don't you train?"

"Yes," Whispersong meowed, watching Star spraying up slush. "But we call cats that are training apprentices. And a warrior mentors them, and they train them to hunt and fight."

"Hunt *and* fight?" Moth echoed with disbelief in his voice.

"Yes," Bumblefrost replied with a glance at the dark gray tom. "Don't you?"

"No, one cat can't do both hunting and fighting for their Tribe! Isn't it hard?"

Echoheart shook her head. "No, it's not hard. It's useful."

"*All* cats should be taught both ways," Bumblefrost exclaimed, green eyes narrowed. "How else could a cat survive? I mean—" He cut off as Whispersong gave him a warning glare.

Moth looked slightly offended. "We survive because we all *help* one another; the—"

"Well, that's how it is in the Clans, too," Bumblefrost interrupted.

Moth blinked with narrowed amber eyes.

Echoheart sat in silence. Even if Bumblefrost's remarks *were* kind of rude, she couldn't help but agree with him. The Clans' ways of training seemed much less confusing and *much* more useful. Echoheart didn't know how she could survive if she could only hunt or only fight. How could any cat survive that way?

She turned back to Moth. "So what exactly do prey-hunters and cave-guards do?" she asked, trying to divert Moth's attention away from Bumblefrost's comments. "Why do cats train to be either one or the other?"

Moth blinked. "A prey-hunter catches prey for the Tribe and a cave-guard protects the cave. Stoneteller chooses if a young cat will be a prey-hunter or a cave-guard just before they're about to become to-bes. The swift, quick-witted kits become prey-hunters and the fierce, strong-willed kits become cave-guards." Moth paused, then added, "I'm a cave guard, and Leaf is a prey-hunter. Star is a to-be training to become a prey-hunter."

"But... but this is a hunting patrol," Whispersong meowed in confusion. "Why do you, a cave-guard, need to come hunting? I thought that you only trained to fight, so you wouldn't know how to hunt."

"I'm not useless," Moth meowed stiffly.

Whispersong looked away awkwardly, and Bumblefrost shifted closer to her at the gray tom's reply. Whispersong stared at her paws and muttered something that sounded like, "I didn't say you were."

"Who'd protect the prey-hunters from eagles and hawks?" Moth continued. "Cave-guards watch the skies and make sure that the prey-hunters are safe while they hunt."

"That's smart," Echoheart meowed thoughtfully.

"Let's get going!" Leaf called impatiently, sitting on a stone by the river. "Star and I found a hare trail."

"*Hair* trail?" Whispersong stared at the mountain cats in confusion.

"Yes, a hare. It's a type of rabbit," Star meowed, burying her nose in the wet snow.

Moth nodded, then followed his Tribemates over the river, across a few stepping stones jutting out from the icy water's foaming surface. Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost followed, and soon the six cats were headed through the mountain territory, following Leaf.

Echoheart looked up at the crystal clear blue sky, dotted with fluffy white clouds drifting above her head. A chilly breeze blew across the flat stone land, waving in the sparse patches of grass protruding from the rocks. The river gurgled to their left, and mist sprayed up as it crashed over the rocks and rushed down the mountainside.

Soon Leaf stopped, staring into a patch of brown grass. Star stalked forward past Leaf, and Echoheart stared at Whispersong in confusion. Had she found the hare? Echoheart couldn't smell anything but the wet stone and melting snow.

Suddenly a white and brown shape bolted from the grass. Star immediately sprang after it, and Leaf followed. The two mountain cats raced up the slope as the large rabbit leapt through the slush, spraying it up behind it. Leaf cut to the side, nodding at Star. Leaf lunged at the hare, and it dodged, heading right toward Star. Star

sprinted forward, and Echoheart watched in awe as her claws met the hare's fur. Soon Star was trotting down the stones with the large rabbit in her mouth.

"That was amazing!" Whispersong exclaimed.

Star's eyes shone. Leaf came after her, panting hard.

Moth congratulated his two Tribemates, then meowed, "Let's go to the meadow."

Meadow? There was a meadow? Excitement tingled in Echoheart's paws. She couldn't wait to see a large patch of grass again, just like at home!

Leaf took the lead, congratulating Star as she hid the hare under a boulder.

Moth followed, scanning the white-splotched sky. Bumblefrost and Whispersong walked side by side, leaping from boulder to boulder as they made their own way down the slope.

Soon enough, as the sun shone straight above their heads, Echoheart saw that the expanse of stone was flattening out, where patches of brown grass waved in the cold wind. Echoheart's heart leapt. It was definitely not as much grass as in the meadow back home, but it was grass!

Echoheart ran over to Whispersong and Bumblefrost, but their eyes were full of fright. Echoheart stopped, heart pounding. "What?" she murmured worriedly.

Whispersong lifted her nose into the wind and sniffed, and Bumblefrost froze.

Leaf stared at them, pelt bristling. "What is it?" he hissed to the two Clan cats, who were standing on a boulder to their right.

Moth narrowed his eyes through the grass, and lashed his tail. "I don't see anything."

Whispersong sighed, sounding relieved, and Bumblefrost meowed,

"It's only a herd of deer. Though I thought I smelled something else..." He trailed off, letting his voice die in the wind.

Moth and Leaf relaxed. Star sprinted toward Bumblefrost and Whispersong and meowed excitedly, "I've never seen a deer before!" She sprang up beside them and stared wide-eyed. "They're coming this way," she exclaimed in awe. "They're so big!"

Leaf chuckled. "Well, at least they're harmless, so long as you don't get too close."

"They're still coming," Star meowed, craning her neck higher. "They're heading toward us, and they're starting to run."

"Run?" Moth echoed.

Suddenly a loud barking erupted in the air. Echoheart froze. A dog! But what would a dog be doing up here in the mountains? They only lived with their Twolegs!

"Dogs!" Whispersong screeched. "*Huge* ones!"

"*That's* what I smelled!" Bumblefrost yowled, turning to the Tribe cats.

Moth widened his eyes, ears perked and tail bushy. "Those are—"

"Run!" Leaf yelped, cutting off Moth's sentence.

Star raised her voice and hollered, "Up here! Quick! Maybe they won't see us!"

Leaf bolted toward Whispersong, Bumblefrost, and Star, who all stood frozen with fright on top of the boulder. Echoheart and Moth dashed after Leaf. Echoheart landed clumsily on the large, icy boulder and watched as the herd of deer sprinted toward the meadow, fear wide in their eyes.

Suddenly three dog-like creatures burst from behind a cluster of boulders across the meadow, racing after the deer. They had long gray and white fur, large ears, and long bushy tails. Their long dog-like snouts were opened, revealing sharp fangs and lolling tongues.

They tore after the deer, trying to cut off a young fawn as it fell behind, sides heaving. The huge dog-like creatures leapt on top of it, killing it in a heartbeat.

Echoheart swallowed nervously and lowered herself flat on the stone. She felt exposed on the boulder, and she hoped to StarClan that the creatures weren't hungry enough to hunt for the six cats on the boulder.

Echoheart watched as the deer herd disappeared down the hill. The dog-like creatures let out a howl, suddenly bone-chilling familiar, and Echoheart's mind flashed back to the forest.

She was in a dark, dream-like vision. Her camp was abandoned; her Clanmates were gone. A huge creature stepped from the trees and into the shadows, letting out a yowl.

Then the memory swirled out of focus and she was padding through the forest, following Whispersong and carrying a large, dead butterfly out of the camp. They watched as it changed color, fading from blue, to yellow, to orange, to black. She remembered the falling stars, and the evil yowling as a blood-colored moon lit up the sky, the evil yowling of the creature from hers and Whispersong's visions...

Echoheart's mind reeled as the memories faded. What if *these* creatures, these dogs-like beasts, were the danger in StarClan's prophecy?

Echoheart felt her heart pounding in her chest, and she could taste the fear on her tongue. Her breathing was quick and ragged, and her legs felt wobbly and weak.

"Great spirits of the Tribe," exclaimed Star quietly as she watched the pack of dog-like beasts tear at their prey, dragging Echoheart from her thoughts.

Echoheart blinked, took a deep breath, then looked at Moth. "What *were* those?"

"Wolves," Moth replied bitterly. "They prey on the deer and hares

around here, and sometimes even cats. But they don't try if there's a large group of us."

"Good," Bumblefrost growled, his pelt still bristled.

"Those hare-dunged wolves wouldn't dare come back," Star hissed, tail lashing.

"Hopefully not," Leaf murmured, watching the three wolves drag the dead fawn up the mountain. They soon disappeared behind the boulders again, and Echoheart sighed with relief.

"Let's *go*," Star urged Moth and Leaf. "I don't want to go anywhere *near* the wolves, and besides, we still need to hunt."

Leaf nodded.

"Yes, come on," Moth meowed, jumping off the boulder. Leaf and Star followed, and Bumblefrost and Whispersong went next. Echoheart glanced one last time at the place where the wolves had gone, then leapt after her sister.

"You three can try and hunt now," Moth suggested.

"Maybe I should teach them first," Leaf meowed from up ahead.

"We already know how to hunt, thanks," Bumblefrost retorted.

"Not in that mountains, you don't," Leaf shot back. "It's different."

"We'll just have to wait and see," Moth meowed. "But we should let them try."

Leaf sighed. "We might as well." He turned to Bumblefrost. "You can go with Star and me. You three can stay here," he meowed, motioning to Moth, Echoheart, and Whispersong.

"Why can't they come too?" Bumblefrost asked with an edge to his voice as he looked at Echoheart and Whispersong.

Echoheart rolled her eyes as Moth explained again how there needed to be cats looking for danger and making sure the hunting

cats were safe. No matter what Bumblefrost said about not feeling like a DayClan warrior, he sure did act like one, Echoheart thought. With his quick temper and bossy personality, any Clan cat could guess he'd been raised in DayClan.

Bumblefrost sighed. "Alright. Fine," he meowed reluctantly. Then he turned and followed Leaf and Star though a patch of snow and behind a boulder.

Moth got to his paws and walked around, sniffing the rocks.

"What's he doing?" Whispersong murmured.

Echoheart shrugged. "Who knows? But he does know what he's doing. He's lived here his whole life." There was a pause. Echoheart turned to Whispersong and took her chance. "Whispersong, while we were watching those wolves, I had a flashback, a memory. Remember the howling of the creature in our visions, and the howling in the butterfly wing sign?"

Whispersong nodded, her brown eyes narrowed in confusion.

Echoheart sighed. "What if a *wolf* is the danger StarClan prophesized?"

Whispersong widened her eyes. "But—" then she cut off, staring at the ground. "Maybe, but the creature in the vision seemed much bigger, and I thought it was black."

Echoheart sighed. "Oh, yeah."

"But we should still talk to the Tribe cats about the creatures around here. They'll probably be able to tell what the creature in our vision is from our description of it."

"Hopefully. We need to find out as much as we can before we head back home."

There was a pause, then Whispersong asked, "When *will* we go back home?"

"I don't know," Echoheart sighed. "I guess whenever we think we are

ready to go back and unite the Clans and prepare for the danger."

"I hope it's not too soon," Whispersong fretted, worry edging her voice.

They sat in silence for a while, watching the clouds float across the sky. A small cry made Echoheart turn her head. It sounded like a bird.

"Look what he caught!"

Echoheart and Whispersong jerked their heads as Bumblefrost walked proudly toward them, a kestrel in his mouth. His pale green eyes shone and his black and light brown striped pelt rippled in pleasure.

"He did really well," Leaf meowed, sounding surprised. "Now, if you two want to try, you can," he meowed to Echoheart and Whispersong.

"We'll probably need to go further downhill; most of the prey near here will have fled at that bird's cry," Star pointed out.

Moth nodded, padding up from behind a boulder. "I found a vole scent-trail over there," he meowed, pointing to the boulder he'd just come from.

"Let's follow it!" Star purred, following Moth around the boulder. Bumblefrost found a spot to hide the kestrel, while Echoheart and Whispersong bounded after Moth, Leaf, and Star.

Echoheart sniffed the snow beside the boulder. Sure enough, the scent of vole filled her scent-glands, and her mouth watered.

Whispersong sniffed around her. "It's strong here," she murmured.

Then a sudden movement caught Echoheart's eye, and she instinctively froze. The vole dashed through the grass. Star bunched her muscles to spring, but Leaf stopped her and gave her a look. The young silver she-cat nodded eagerly at Leaf and watched the vole in silence.

What just passed between them? Echoheart wondered, perplexed.

All six cats sat still, and Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost all stared at each other in confusion. Why were they still sitting here? The prey was *right* there!

Bumblefrost rocked his haunches, impatience getting to him. Moth gave him a stern look and shook his head slowly. Bumblefrost's hackles relaxed, but his eyes were still filled with frustration at not being able to catch the prey.

Suddenly a screech filled the air, loud and piercing. Echoheart looked up from the boulder they were hiding under and saw a large bird silhouette flying in front of the sun. Echoheart blinked away the sun's brightness and watched as the bird circled above them, crying out again. An eagle!

"Don't move," breathed Leaf.

"Why don't we just get the vole, then leave?" asked Whispersong, staring up at the large bird in worry. "It'll eat us!"

"Just watch," Moth whispered.

The eagle let out another shrill cry, then dove. It's huge, sharp talons were outstretched, and it was heading right towards them.

Wait, no it wasn't! It was going for the vole! Understanding struck Echoheart, and she watched as the eagle locked it's talons around the vole, and in the same heartbeat, Moth, Star, and Leaf sprang from under the boulder and leapt at the eagle. Leaf clawed at its left wing, Moth clawed it's right, and Star shredded its belly. The eagle tried to lift off of the ground, the vole still in its grip. But Star lunged at it, pulling it back to the ground. Moth and Leaf raced forward and bit it, tearing at its neck until it lay limp.

"That was *brilliant* !" Bumblefrost exclaimed. "So *that's* why you didn't want to catch the vole! That's smart!"

"Now you have ten times the amount of prey!" Whispersong exclaimed in admiration.

Star licked a fresh cut on her flank proudly. "Yes, but they're vicious, so you have to be careful."

Moth nodded. "We'd better get some herbs from Stoneteller when we get back."

"Hunting here isn't the same as your forest, huh?" Leaf purred, glancing at the eagle.

Bumblefrost shook his head. "Not quite."

"Let's collect the rest of our prey and head back to the cave," Moth suggested.

Leaf, Moth, and Star picked up the dead eagle and dragged it up the mountain, making tracks in the snow patches. Echoheart shivered as the snow stuck in between her claws, and she dashed ahead, walking on the stone instead. When they reached the spot where they'd hidden each of their catches, Echoheart carried the hare, Whispersong carried the vole, and Bumblefrost carried his kestrel. Echoheart trotted up the mountain, enjoying the refreshing wind buffeting her fur. The fog-like clouds floated above in the light blue sky, and the river soon rushed in the distance as they neared the waterfall.

Once again Echoheart's mind drifted back to the wolves and their bone-chilling howls. Could they really be the danger StarClan had prophesied?

Chapter 3

Whispersong stepped inside the cave, Bumblefrost beside her. The patrol followed Moth and Leaf to the Tribe's fresh-kill pile and dropped their catches on top. A few of the kits goggled at the large eagle that Moth, Leaf, and Star were carrying, their eyes round as moons.

"Look at it!"

"It's huge!"

"I want to eat it now!"

Whispersong turned to Bumblefrost, and they shared a glance of amusement.

Echoheart padded up to them. "Should we speak with Stoneteller? About the wolves?"

"Wolves?" Bumblefrost asked in confusion. "What about them?"

"Echoheart thought that they might be the danger in our vision," Whispersong told him.

"And how would Stoneteller know?" Bumblefrost asked.

Whispersong looked at Echoheart, who narrowed her eyes in confusion. "I don't know," Echoheart murmured. "Maybe we should think about it more, and get more information, before we ask Stoneteller about it."

Whispersong nodded. "Yes, good idea."

Bumblefrost glanced across the cave. "Let's ask if we can have a share of prey. I'm starving."

The three forest cats padded across the cave, stepping around a tussling group of kits. Once they reached the back of the cave where

the entrance to the Tribe's leader's den was, the three peered inside.

"Stoneteller?" Bumblefrost called out cautiously.

Within heartbeats, the dark brown tabby tom stepped out of his cave, his dark yellow eyes full of concern. "Is something wrong?"

Ecoheart shook her head. "No, we were just wondering if we could take a share of the prey."

Stoneteller smiled. "Of course. While you're here, you may take your share any time, provided there's enough for the kit-mothers and their kits."

"Of course." Whispersong dipped her head. "Back home, queens and kits must be fed first before warriors eat. So we'd do the same here."

Stoneteller nodded. "You did hunt today. How did it go?"

Bumblefrost meowed, "Pretty good. Your Tribe is organized very well when it comes to hunting." Whispersong knew he was thinking of how Moth, Star, and Leaf knew to wait and let the smaller prey attract the eagle.

Maybe DayClan could try that, Whispersong thought. *They do have hawks and eagles every now and then out on the moorlands.*

Stoneteller dipped his head slightly. "Thank you... is it Bumblefrost?"

The DayClan warrior nodded.

Stoneteller let out a breath of amusement. "I can see why you were named that. Your stripes resemble a bumblebee."

Bumblefrost smiled slightly, flicking his tail.

Stoneteller dipped his head to the three of them, then lead them to the fresh-kill pile. The Tribe leader grabbed a hare and walked over to Screech, the brown tom they'd seen earlier talking to the two black and gray kits, who now sat with their mother across the cave.

Whispersong watched as each Tribe cat grabbed a piece of prey took it to a Tribemate, and together, they shared a meal. Whispersong turned and saw Bumblefrost walking up to her, his kestrel in his jaws. He dropped it at her feet. Warmth shone in his pale green eyes as he asked, "Do you want to share?"

Whispersong smiled. "Sure."

The two settled down and dug into the bird. Whispersong licked her lips as the strong taste of the kestrel filled her mouth.

By dusk, every cat lay beside each other, sharing tongues and exchanging news. Whispersong entwined her tail with Bumblefrost's, and she leaned against his side, splayed out across the stone floor. His head was rested in front of his paws, and his legs were curled up underneath him. Whispersong washed his ears and watched Echoheart from across the cave.

She was telling a story to three young kits, two of them the black and gray kits called Night and Howl that they'd seen earlier. Echoheart was standing on her hind legs and lashing out at the air. The kits gasped and shrank to the ground, eyes wide. Whispersong could just hear her sister's voice among the echoing of the other Tribe cats as she described the battle with DayClan all those moons ago.

"I was only an apprentice, and this cat—" Echoheart meowed in a low voice.

"What's an apprentice?" Howl asked, tilting his head to one side.

"What we call a cat in training. You call them to-bes, right?"

The three kits nodded.

Echoheart nodded thoughtfully, then continued. "So I clawed at him, trying to drive him off of our territory."

"Why'd you drive off a cat from your own Tribe?" asked the she-kit, Night.

"He wasn't from my Clan. He was trying to steal my Clan's

territory."

"Oh," Night murmured quietly, her eyes narrowed.

"Why don't you all just share territory?" asked the third kit, a dark ginger tom.

Echoheart shook her head. "The Clans wouldn't cooperate; all four Clans want different territory, for themselves."

"That's selfish!" Howl burst out.

Echoheart's neck began to rise, then she let it lie flat. Whispersong was glad her sister didn't retort. They were kits, Tribe kits; they wouldn't understand Clan ways. Echoheart meowed, "Maybe to you; but for the Clans, it's completely normal."

"Oh," the ginger tom-kit murmured, blue eyes troubled.

"It's just a story, Dust," Night butted the ginger kit's shoulder playfully.

Howl stared at Echoheart. "So, what happened next?" he asked.

Echoheart smiled, and Whispersong heard her sister meow, "The tom-cat who was attacking me, named Burningwood, launched himself at me, and I stood up onto my back legs, like this." Echoheart reared and towered over the three kits, whose eyes were wide in amazement.

Then she slammed her paws onto the stone floor. "I clawed his head, pushing him to the ground." The kits gasped in awe. "He fell over, but he wasn't finished yet. He circled around me, his fur all fluffed up. I hissed at him and told him to get off my territory, but he still pounced." Howl and Night's tails swished in anticipation. Dust's blue eyes were wide, and he gaped at Echoheart. "We rolled in the grass, over and over and over, until, finally I was pinned down." She gently pushed Howl over, holding him down easily to the floor. "I was trapped."

"How'd you get away?" Howl asked, staring up from underneath Echoheart, eyes shining with amazement.

Echoheart let the small kit up and whispered, "I clawed at his stomach with my hind claws. Then I—"

"Like this?" Night asked, pouncing on Howl then kicking his belly fur with her hind paws.

Echoheart smiled. "Yes."

Night's eyes shone.

Echoheart lowered her voice again. "But he was such a good fighter that he pinned me down again."

"Again?" Dust asked, eyes wide in worry.

Echoheart nodded grimly. "But this time, I was *really* stuck. I couldn't escape."

Howl's eyes grew large, and Night and Dust stepped closer.

"But just then, Burningwood was gone!" Echoheart meowed.

"How?" Howl exclaimed.

"Whispersong saved me."

"Who's Whispersong?" Night cocked her head.

"My sister." Echoheart pointed to Whispersong across the cave. Whispersong felt her fur grow hot as the three kits stared at her admiringly. She busied herself by washing Bumblefrost's neck fur as he drifted off beside her.

"Yep. And we won the battle," Echoheart meowed proudly.

"That's amazing!" Howl exclaimed, and Night and Dust nodded eagerly.

Moss, Night and Howl's mother, watched on as Echoheart talked to the three kits. The brown- and black-patched she-cat's eyes were narrowed in dislike and her tail twitched in disapproval. She got to her paws and stiffly walked over to them. "Time to go to sleep," she

meowed, flashing Echoheart a reproachful glance.

"Aw!" Howl whined.

Moss gave him a stern look, and the young tom followed her reluctantly across the cave.

"Did you hear Echoheart's story?" Night asked her mother eagerly as they walked away. "She bravely fought off trespassers to protect her own Tribe, just like we fight off eagles!"

Moss grunted, "She fought *cats*. That is not acceptable. Ever. It is against the word of the Tribe of Endless Hunting." She lashed her tail, muttering to herself. "Teaching cats to fight other cats..."

"But Mother," Howl protested. "The cats were trying to steal their prey!"

"Enough," Moss ordered, a hint of a growl in her voice. Howl and Night glanced at each other, then quietly followed their mother into their den. Whispersong saw Echoheart sigh, then she blinked and got to her paws, padding over to Whispersong and Bumblefrost.

"They can't accept the fact that we fight other cats; it's not just Moss," Echoheart sighed.

Whispersong looked up at her sister. "It's just different. They didn't grow up the same way we did."

"But they look at me like I'm *evil* or something. They hate the idea of fighting other cats."

"They'll just have to accept it," Whispersong muttered. "They can't change our ways; it's how we've been living for seasons upon seasons."

Echoheart nodded, blue eyes still looking troubled.

"Anyway, we wouldn't have to be fighting any cats if every Clan agreed to acknowledge borders and cooperate."

Echoheart sighed and nodded. Then she murmured, "It's getting

dark. We should get to sleep."

Whispersong nodded, then nudged Bumblefrost awake.

They had been given nests in the Tribe's elders' den; there were only two elders who slept in the large cave-den, so there was plenty of room for the three Clan cats to sleep.

Whispersong followed her sister across the darkening cave, Bumblefrost wearily stumbling after them. Whispersong curled up on the pile of moss and feathers that the Tribe cats had made for her. Echoheart stretched and laid down beside Whispersong, and Bumblefrost flopped down next to them. Whispersong watched the two drift off to sleep, the twilight fading to night and the darkness washing over the cave. The waterfall roared outside, and the sounds of cats faded out as they all went to bed.

Whispersong's mind drifted to the forest. Was everything alright in DawnClan? Did they know why she and Echoheart had left?

Suddenly Whispersong remembered the dream she'd had a quarter-moon ago, when she'd realized that something terrible was happening back home. Were her Clanmates alright? Dread crept through her fur. Had there been a battle? With DayClan? With foxes? Or with badgers?

Whispersong shuddered. Had any cats died?

Please let them all be okay, she prayed to StarClan.

Homesickness washed over her, and she closed her eyes in sadness, but it was soon replaced by fear. What if the danger was on its way right now? How would she and Echoheart know when to return to help? Whispersong let out a ragged breath, and her body shook. They needed to hurry and figure everything out about the prophecy as they could so they could make their way home. The danger could arrive soon.

But we need a little longer here! We haven't even figured that much out! Whispersong thought.

But how much longer did they have?

Chapter 4

Hailstorm watched the moon rising above his head as Eveningstar called a Clan meeting. Cats crept out of their dens, grief and weariness dragging them down. Raypaw sat quietly beside Bronzepelt with dull eyes. Sunfur, Sparrowtail, and Eaglefeather silently joined Meadowheart and Prairiefoot. Clovertail and Yellowpaw settled down beside Hailstorm, and Rustypelt and Sparktail joined him on his other side.

Eveningstar sat on top of the High-stone, anguish in his brown eyes. "Thank you for joining me," he meowed, bowing his head. "DawnClan needs a new deputy, and now, before moonhigh, I must appoint one."

Hailstorm looked sideways at Yellowpaw, who was staring at Goldheart. Would Eveningstar choose Sunfur, like Yellowpaw's dream had hinted?

Eveningstar sighed, then looked over the Clan. "Twigfoot will be mourned for moons on end; he was strong and courageous. He fought hard to protect his Clan, every day, until his very last breath. He was a deputy to be proud of." Hailstorm felt his eyes mist. He stared at his paws as he listened to the Clan leader continue. "But DawnClan must have a new deputy. So, I say these words before StarClan, so that the spirit of Twigfoot and our warrior ancestors may hear and approve my choice." Eveningstar raised his head to the sky, staring at the appearing stars.

One of those is Twigfoot, Hailstorm thought.

Eveningstar looked at the Clan again as he announced, "The new deputy of DawnClan will be Sunfur."

Every cat turned to look at the orange-brown warrior. Her limbs were frozen in shock, and she stared at Eveningstar with wide eyes. "Me?" she gasped.

Eveningstar nodded, a faint smile twitching the corners of his mouth.

Sunfur stared around in surprise, then she got to her paws and slowly padded up to the High-stone. She leapt up beside Eveningstar, then turned to face the Clan. "I... I know I can never replace Twigfoot... but I'll try and do my best to serve DawnClan like he did."

Sparrowtail and Eaglefeather stood up. "Sunfur! Sunfur!" they cheered.

Meadowheart, Prairiefoot, and Creekfall joined in next. Aspenleaf and her kits chanted beside them, and Rustypelt, Sparktail, Twilightfoot, Copperleaf, and Spruceclaw stood on their feet and shouted out the new deputy's name the loudest.

Hailstorm raised his head toward the High-stone and called out the new deputy's name. Though the loss of Twigfoot still clawed at his heart, he knew that life would go on, as life always did. Sunfur would help Eveningstar in leading DawnClan in the days ahead, and Twigfoot was now safe in StarClan's hunting grounds, watching over his Clan there.

Hailstorm stared around the clearing. The whole Clan called Sunfur's name, all except Moonshine, who was staring blankly at Twigfoot's body. Her pale green eyes were narrowed and her white, silver-flecked fur was bristled. What was going through her mind?

Hailstorm shuddered. He'd never seen his mother like this.

"Wait; the meeting isn't over."

Hailstorm turned his head back to Eveningstar in surprise as he spoke again. Sunfur jumped down from the High-stone, joining Sparrowtail and Eaglefeather once more. Cats who had started to disperse back into the clearing stopped at Evningstar's words and sat back down.

Eveningstar dipped his head to his new deputy, then spoke again. "Twilightfoot has a request. He and I have discussed it, and he

believes it's what's best for himself, and the Clan."

Every cat turned to look at the black pelt of Twilightfoot, whose white chest and paws were glowing in the fading light. He raised his head toward Eveningstar, ignoring the confused stares from his Clanmates.

"Twilightfoot, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?" Eveningstar asked the senior tom.

Hailstorm widened his eyes at this. Twilightfoot was joining the elders?

Well, Hailstorm realized, *he* is *getting old. The battle with DayClan must have proven to him that he's not cut out to be a warrior anymore.*

Twilightfoot nodded. "It is."

"Then your Clan honors you and all the service you have given. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest. You've earned it," Eveningstar nodded to the black and white tom.

"Thank you, Eveningstar," Twilightfoot meowed, dipping his head to his leader.

Eveningstar jumped down from the High-stone, joining Sunfur and Rustypelt by the fresh-kill log, staring into the clearing. Hailstorm followed Eveningstar's gaze. Moonshine was crouched stiffly over Twigfoot's body, grief and anger filling her green eyes. When the elders passed the DawnClan leader on their way to their den, he beckoned them over. "We need to bury him, tonight."

Hailstorm looked at Clovertail, who'd heard it, too. "We should get Moonshine to her nest," Hailstorm suggested, his own heart breaking with the thought of seeing his father buried. "She doesn't need to watch it. She... she'll get hysterical."

Clovertail nodded mutely, then cautiously padded over to their mother, who was hunched over, staring at her paws. She looked up as her two kits reached her, pale green eyes flashing in the darkness. "What do you want?" she asked warily.

Hailstorm's heart throbbed. Did his own mother no longer trust him? He took a deep breath and meowed quietly, "You need to get some rest." He looked up at the sky; the moon was shining brightly in the trees. "Tomorrow night is the full moon, and you need to have full energy if you're going to the Gathering."

Moonshine's eyes flicked between Hailstorm and Clovertail, and she looked like she was about to protest. But then she sighed, eyes heavy with exhaustion. "Fine."

Clovertail looked relieved, then nudged Moonshine to her paws. Hailstorm followed the two across the clearing, watching as they disappeared inside the warriors' den. Hailstorm glanced over his shoulder at Twigfoot's body; Spruceclaw, Copperleaf, and Twilightfoot were moving it outside the camp. Sunfur supervised them, and she turned and nodded at Hailstorm gratefully for taking Moonshine away. Hailstorm nodded briskly, grief tugging sharply at his heart, then turned back to the warriors' den, seeing the last glimpse of his father's body as the three elders carried him out of the camp.

Hailstorm sighed shakily, his heart feeling clawed. *Goodbye, Father*.

He turned back and entered the den, blinking away the darkness. He curled up on his nest beside Clovertail, who was washing their mother's ragged fur. Her eyes were closed, and snores rumbled in her chest. Hailstorm sighed. She looked better, but Hailstorm knew that when she found out about Twigfoot being buried without her knowing, she'd be furious.

Hailstorm blinked. What was happening to his mother? Moonshine was *never* like this; she never had been. Worry crept through Hailstorm's body. What if she never got better? What if she couldn't be a proper warrior anymore because of it?

Hailstorm sighed again, breath uneven.

Had Twigfoot's death really changed her that much?

* * *

"Twigfoot!"

Hailstorm flitted his eyes quickly at the sound of his mother's voice, filled with fury. He scrambled to his paws, Clovertail just behind him. Moonshine was pacing in the clearing, her ears flattened and her tail lashing. She looked up at Hailstorm and Clovertail as they stood in the entrance to the warriors' den. Her eyes narrowed and filled with smoldering green fire. Moonshine's white and gray-flecked fur bristled and she stalked forward, right toward Hailstorm and Clovertail.

StarClan help us. Fear crept through his body at his mother's anger, then sadness. *How can I be afraid of my own mother?* Hailstorm thought with despair.

"Where's Twigfoot?" Moonshine demanded furiously.

Clovertail gulped next to Hailstorm.

"Well?" Moonshine growled, a crazed look in her eyes.

Hailstorm retreated to the grasses behind him. "He was buried." He didn't mention Twilightfoot, Copperleaf, or Spruceclaw's name, lest Moonshine's rage be angled toward them.

Sadness replaced Moonshine's anger, and she bowed her head. "He's gone," she choked. But the anger wasn't missing for long. Moonshine looked up again and furiously growled, "You two *tricked* me! My own kits tricked me! You didn't want me near Twigfoot!"

"Moonshine!" Yellowpaw's worried meow interrupted them.

Moonshine turned to her daughter. "Were you in this too?" she spat.

Yellowpaw didn't flinch like last time, though Hailstorm saw sadness fill her usually-bright green eyes. "Moonshine, you must accept that Twigfoot's gone, even though it's painful; it hurts all of us to realize that he's gone. But his body rests peacefully in the earth, and his spirit resides with StarClan, where he will watch over us. He's safe."

Moonshine looked at Yellowpaw, a flicker of her old self pooling in the depths of her green eyes. "But—"

"Twigfoot wouldn't have wanted you to suffer, trust me. He wouldn't have wanted you to ignore your kits, and blame them for trying to help you out," Yellowpaw told her firmly.

"I don't blame you," Moonshine murmured, and she looked away.

"Well, don't blame yourself, either," Yellowpaw snapped, then her eyes softened. "Twigfoot sacrificed himself to save your kits. Without him, Clovertail might be dead," Yellowpaw murmured.

Moonshine turned to Hailstorm and Clovertail. "I know. I... I'm sorry."

Hailstorm sighed with relief, then dipped his head to his mother in acknowledgement.

Clovertail ran up and licked Moonshine's ears, but she still looked troubled.

Yellowpaw stepped forward and murmured, "Don't blame yourself, Moonshine. Don't blame yourself for the bad things happening around you. Just have faith that tomorrow will bring a brighter day, and you will make it through the darkness of tonight."

Moonshine bowed her head, sighed, and nodded. She still looked distant, but at least she wasn't angry anymore.

Yellowpaw still looked concerned. "You need to rest." Moonshine opened her mouth to protest, but Yellowpaw cut her off. "That's a medicine cat's order. Come on, I need to get you a few poppy seeds."

Moonshine obeyed, and followed her daughter across the camp, dragging her paws and bowing her head.

Hailstorm sighed, then turned to Clovertail. "I'm glad she's feeling a bit better."

"Maybe," Clovertail muttered.

* * *

Hailstorm leapt over a damp, mossy log, sniffing the air for prey.

Sunfur had sent Creekfall to lead a hunting patrol, and Sparktail, Hailstorm, and Raypaw had joined him. They were passing the Great Pine, its branches swaying in the warm breeze. The sun shone straight above; it was sunhigh.

Hailstorm turned to Raypaw, who was walking ahead silently, a sad, distant look in his orange eyes. Hailstorm knew very well that he was mourning Twigfoot, who'd been his mentor. Hailstorm felt a knot form in his throat as grief raked at his heart yet again.

Hailstorm slowed to match his pace with Raypaw's, while Sparktail and Creekfall went on ahead. "Do you know who'll be your new mentor?" Hailstorm asked him quietly, voice faltering as he said the last word.

Raypaw sighed, looking pained. "I don't want a new mentor," he managed to murmur.

Hailstorm glanced sadly at the orange tom. "You've had a long apprenticeship." It was true. Raypaw had been training for just over six moons now.

"I know," Raypaw meowed quietly, sounding troubled. "Do you think it's because every cat doesn't think I'm good enough to be warrior?" He looked at Hailstorm with grief and worry in his dull orange eyes.

"No," Hailstorm assured him. "I just think Twig—" he stopped as the name caught painfully in his throat, "I think... he... just wanted to teach you the most he could before you're made a warrior. If you talk to Sunfur or Eveningstar, I'm sure they'd agree that your assessment needs to be soon."

Raypaw nodded, a speck of happiness lighting his eyes for a moment. "Alright."

"Hailstorm! Look at this!" Hailstorm turned as Sparktail called him, worry in her voice. He raced over to her and looked at the ground. Claw marks were raked across the dirt; grass was torn; and bits of fur lay scattered. Hailstorm picked up an acrid scent around the scene too. Although it was one couldn't he couldn't recognize, chills of fear raced down his spine, and he knew it couldn't be any good.

"What happened here?" Raypaw gasped.

Creekfall was sniffing the ground. He lifted his head and replied grimly, "Badger."

A badger? That's *what the smell is?* Hailstorm had heard stories about badgers and how evil they were, but he'd never actually met one. He lowered his nose to the ground and took in the badger scent fully, so he could remember it for later. He wrinkled his nose as the foul stench reached his scent-glands. Then he picked up something else, another scent.

"A cat was here too!" Hailstorm exclaimed, picking up the faint trace of cat-scent.

Creekfall narrowed his eyes, stepping closer to the trampled undergrowth and splattered blood. "You're right. Cats were here. DawnClan cats, I can tell; but the scents are too mingled with the badger's scent and the smell of blood to recognize them."

Raypaw turned to Hailstorm. "Can *you* recognize the scents?"

Hailstorm sniffed the ground again, padding around the blood, and something caught his eye. A tuft of orange fur was caught in a large rosebush. He narrowed his eyes and padded closer to it. He sniffed, and his heart skipped a beat as he recognized the scent. Prairiefoot!

"Prairiefoot was here!" he told the others quickly.

"Prairiefoot?" Sparktail echoed. "Wasn't he on the dawn patrol?"

"Yes! That would mean the dawn patrol met a badger," Creekfall growled.

"But where did they go? And where's the badger?" Raypaw glanced

between the trees urgently.

Hailstorm scanned the ground. He saw black and white fur, full of the badger-scent: badger fur. Then he saw tufts gray fur, *huge* tufts of gray fur, clinging to the thorns of the bramble and rose bushes. Blood was splattered across the leaves and ferns, and Hailstorm's stomach tightened with fear. Eveningstar!

Raypaw gasped. "Is that...?"

"It's Eveningstar's fur!" Creekfall hissed, tail lashing in worry.

"Eveningstar's been injured," Hailstorm stammered.

Sparktail was following a trail of blood through the trees, brown fur scattered around it.

"Sparrowtail!" the red-furred warrior gasped. "Are you alright?" She sounded hysterical.

"*Sparrowtail* ?" Hailstorm exclaimed in worry. "Wasn't she on the dawn patrol too?" He raced forward and pushed his way through the bushes beside Clovertail. Sparrowtail lay limp in the dirt, scratches lining her body. Blood was matted in her brown fur and her flanks rose and fell unevenly.

"Sparrowtail?" Hailstorm gasped. "Sparrowtail!"

The brown warrior's eyes opened slowly.

"Sparrowtail, are you alright? Where's the badger?" Sparktail asked in worry.

Sparrowtail coughed, then she looked around her in fright. "It... It shoved me over here and... and I think I broke my leg." She coughed again, blood sputtering from her mouth. "It was fighting off Prairiefoot and Eveningstar. I *tried* to help, I did, but I couldn't... move."

"No cat blames you, Sparrowtail," Sparktail meowed, worry edging her voice.

"Raypaw," Hailstorm ordered. "Go get Goldheart and Yellowpaw. Quickly!"

Raypaw nodded, eyes wide, and turned tail toward the camp, disappearing behind the bushes and trees.

"Sparktail, stay with Sparrowtail," Creekfall ordered. Sparktail looked ready to protest, but Creekfall cut her off with a growl. "Some cat needs to stay with her!"

Sparktail nodded. "Okay, I'll stay."

Hailstorm and Creekfall nodded, then turned and followed the badger's scent through the forest. Black-and-white, gray, and orange fur littered the forest floor, along with crimson splotches of blood. Hailstorm's heart pounded. What if Prairiefoot or Eveningstar were dead?

Hailstorm skidded to a halt. A low moan of pain filled the air, and Creekfall raced ahead. Hailstorm followed the silver tom as he crashed through the undergrowth in urgency.

Suddenly he stopped, and Hailstorm nearly ran into him.

Prairiefoot was crouched next to Eveningstar, who lay limp in the grass. Bald spots dotted both of the warrior's bodies where patches of fur were missing.

Prairiefoot looked up as Hailstorm and Creekfall reached them. "Oh, thank StarClan you found us. Eveningstar... he's lost a life. I... I don't know how many he has left, but he's very, very wounded. We must get him back to Goldheart, and quickly."

"We will," Hailstorm promised, sniffing the ground. "Where'd the badger go?"

"We drove it away," Prairiefoot coughed.

"Good." Creekfall sighed in relief.

"Come on. You both need to get back to camp," Hailstorm muttered. Prairiefoot nodded and shakily stood up. Hailstorm raced to his side

and let Prairiefoot lean on him.

Creekfall nudged at Eveningstar gently. "He's not moving," he told Hailstorm worriedly.

Hailstorm turned to look at the injured DawnClan leader. "How will we move him?"

"You take Prairiefoot back to camp and send a few stronger warriors out here to help me with Eveningstar. I'll stay with him," Creekfall promised.

Hailstorm was wary. "What if the badger comes back?"

"It won't," Prairiefoot rasped. "It's gone." He wobbled, swaying on his paws.

"Prairiefoot needs to get to the camp," Creekfall meowed. "I'll stay with Eveningstar."

Hailstorm nodded. "Alright." Then he turned and helped the shaky orange warrior through the undergrowth. He fell a few times, blood dripping from a deep wound.

"You've lost a lot of blood," Hailstorm meowed in worry.

What if he'd lost *too* much blood?

Hailstorm shook himself. He *had* to get Prairiefoot home.

When they reached the stream, fear washed over Hailstorm. How would they get across? *He might fall in!*

As if reading his thoughts, Prairiefoot rasped, "I can make it."

"I don't know if you can," Hailstorm meowed. "You're shaking."

"I'll make it," Prairiefoot insisted.

Hailstorm eyed his former mentor warily. "I'll walk right behind you, just in case."

Prairiefoot blinked slowly, then sighed. "Alright," he muttered.

Hailstorm nodded then helped Prairiefoot toward the stream. Hailstorm inhaled deeply, holding his breath as he urged Prairiefoot onto the log-bridge. Its bark was slippery with mist from the stream, which splashed and rushed by beneath him. Hailstorm saw fear flash across Prairiefoot's pale gray-green eyes as he looked around toward him, but a heartbeat later it was replaced by determination. With his claws unsheathed, Prairiefoot crept across. Hailstorm carefully stepped up behind him, ignoring the mist spraying his paws and the sharp rocks protruding from the water's surface. He dug his claws into the damp bark, following just a pawstep behind Prairiefoot. The pale orange tabby tested his footing every step of the way, his legs still weak and shaking. His fur was on edge, and his ears were flattened to his head.

Hailstorm looked ahead. *Halfway there*, Hailstorm told himself.

Then Prairiefoot slipped. Hailstorm rushed forward, but the orange warrior caught his footing just in time, and, shakily, he heaved himself back onto the fallen log.

"Almost there," Hailstorm encouraged, his voice barely a whisper compared to the stream's flow; it seemed to roar in his ears, getting louder each heartbeat they were over it.

"I'm fine," Prairiefoot snapped. His body was shaking, and his fur was spiked with both moisture and fear; his breathing became quick and shallow, and his tail was quivering. His wounds were still dripping with fresh blood that stained his orange fur.

Only one fox-length left. Come on, Hailstorm silently urged Prairiefoot. The two cats crept forward, their fur getting wetter and wetter with the mist. Hailstorm shivered. *Nearly there!* Hailstorm thought in relief. *Jump!*

Prairiefoot steadied himself, then leapt the last tail length, landing clumsily in the tall grass on the stream's bank. He let out a long exhale, then rested his head on the ground, eyes closed.

Hailstorm hooked his claws into the bark, then rocked his haunches and leapt after Prairiefoot. He landed beside him, then helped him up to his feet once more.

By the time they reached the camp, they found out that every cat had heard about the badger attack from Raypaw, and every cat in the camp was waiting for them to safely return.

Sparktail and Sunfur rushed forward, urging the injured warrior to the medicine cats' den. Yellowpaw stepped forward, helping Prairiefoot along to Goldheart's den.

"Hailstorm!"

Hailstorm turned at his name. He barely had time to see who it was before he was being licked all over. He sniffed. It was Clovertail.

"Thank StarClan you're alright!" she meowed through licks. Her breathing was heavy, like she'd been holding her breath while waiting for some cat to return safely. "How's Prairiefoot?" she asked. Before Hailstorm could open his mouth, she shot out more questions. "Where's Creekfall and Sparktail? Did Sparrowtail get hurt? Is Eveningstar alright? Where is h—" Hailstorm flicked his tail over her mouth. She glared at him, shoving his tail away and spitting into the dirt. "Well?" she prompted.

Hailstorm sighed. "I bet you heard some of it from Raypaw."

His sister nodded. "He told us the dawn patrol met a badger. He took Rustypelt and Goldheart to get Eveningstar and Sparrowtail, but are they okay?."

"Well," Hailstorm sighed. "Sparktail stayed with Sparrowtila, who is injured, but nothing Goldheart can't heal, I believe. But Eveningstar... he couldn't move. He..." Hailstorm paused. Should he tell Clovertail that their leader had lost a life? *No. Eveningstar will choose if he wants any cat to know*. "Eveningstar was very injured and unconscious. So Creekfall volunteered to stay with him while I took Prairiefoot back to camp."

"Oh," Clovertail sighed. "What happened to the badger?"

"I don't know. All Prairiefoot said was that they drove it off."

"I hope it found its way to DayClan's camp. Those fox-hearts deserve it," Clovertail muttered bitterly.

Hailstorm nodded.

Commotion behind him made him turn his head. Goldheart, Rustypelt, Eveningstar, Sparrowtail, Creekfall, and Sparktail were heading through the camp entrance. Eveningstar looked as good as new, except for a few cuts scattering his pelt. Hailstorm knew that when a leader lost a life, StarClan healed the wound that killed him, but everything else was left.

Sunfur raced toward her leader, looking him over and bombarding him with questions. Eaglefeather dashed over to his sister, licking her ragged and bloody pelt, while Aspenleaf and her three kits raced over to Creekfall. Pinekit and Rosekit looked eager to hear the story, but Needlekit looked worried.

Goldheart lead Eveningstar and Sparrowtail across the camp to his den, disappearing behind the drapes of ivy and into the stone cave.

Raypaw padded up to Sunfur. "What about the Gathering tonight? Will Eveningstar be fit enough to go?"

"He *has* to be," Gravelpelt meowed. "If not, Rainstar will think DawnClan has been weakened. And after that recent battle, we have to show DayClan that we're still strong."

Sunfur sighed in worry. "He doesn't look *too* bad, but Goldheart will be the one who ultimately decides if Eveningstar can go."

"What will happen if he can't?" Raypaw asked.

"Usually if the leader isn't well enough to go to a Gathering," Bronzepelt added. "The deputy speaks."

Sunfur nodded, sighing. "We'll just have to see."

Hailstorm looked at Clovertail in worry. What *would* Rainstar say if Eveningstar wasn't there tonight? Would she take advantage of this weakness like she had with NightClan?

Hailstorm shivered. They didn't need another battle.

He just hoped to StarClan that Eveningstar would have enough

strength by tonight.

Chapter 5

A full moon flashed across Hailstorm's vision as he padded beside his Clanmates. The darkening forest was dappled with the silver light, the thin moonbeams slicing through the layers of leaves above the cats' heads. The stars glittered brightly against the black sky, and, as the trees began thinning out to the meadow, more and more of StarClan was visible.

Hailstorm lowered his gaze from the sky as he leapt over a fallen log, Eaglefeather behind him.

Eveningstar walked at the front of the patrol, Sunfur following him. The DawnClan leader had insisted on going to the Gathering, to Goldheart's disapproval. Eveningstar had persisted, telling the medicine cat that he was fine enough, and finally Goldheart had agreed.

So now Hailstorm, Eveningstar, Sunfur, Eaglefeather, Gravelpelt, Twilightfoot, Sparktail, Bronzepelt, Clovertail, and Creekfall were on their way to the Gathering. Eveningstar had the Gathering patrol larger than normal, and made of all warriors, to show DayClan that DawnClan was still strong despite the aftermath of the recent battle. But he'd also left some strong warriors back at camp in case DayClan tried anything or in case the badger came back.

Hailstorm looked at Eveningstar as he walked along in front of him. The DawnClan leader's wounds were clearly visible underneath his thick gray pelt, now crusted with dried blood. Hailstorm was surprised he wasn't weaker, but then he remembered what Prairiefoot had said: Eveningstar had lost a life. His worst wounds had been healed by StarClan.

Hailstorm shook away his thoughts as they reached the meadow. He shivered as he gazed out at the moonlit moor, feeling like there were DayClan cats hiding behind every patch of grass, every boulder, and every bush.

Hailstorm was suddenly aware of his wounds from the battle with DayClan a few days ago. They had started scabbing over, but they now stung like new as his memories flashed back to that dark night in NightClan's camp. He hoped the DayClan cats had wounds on their pelts as well so it didn't look like DayClan was stronger than the rest of the Clans, despite the fact that they'd lost the battle.

Eveningstar lead the way across the silvery water of the river, leaping from stone to stone as the rushing water splashed his paws. Sunfur followed him, Sparktail not far behind. Bronzepelt, Twilightfoot, and Creekfall took their turn next, and Hailstorm went after, carefully jumping from each wet rock to the other until he was on the safe ground of the riverbank. He stood next to the patrol and waited for the rest of their patrol to safely join them on the other side. Clovertail, Eaglefeather, and Gravelpelt came last, and, once they stood beside Hailstorm once more, Eveningstar turned and lead the patrol through the grassy moorland. The DawnClan patrol stayed close to the Thunderpath, fearful of DayClan accusing them of being too far into their territory. They couldn't afford a fight, especially not tonight.

"Eveningstar!"

Every cat turned toward the voice. Dark shapes raced across the Thunderpath: the DuskClan Gathering patrol. At the head was Orangestar, the DuskClan leader, and behind him was his deputy, Falconflight. A white tom followed, and Hailstorm immediately recognized him from the battle with DayClan.

"Hailstorm," the white tom meowed as he reached the other side of the Thunderpath.

"Hello, Blizzardclaw." Hailstorm dipped his head respectfully to the DuskClan warrior.

"How is DawnClan recovering from the battle?" Orangestar asked Eveningstar. "You still look wounded. Are you not healing?"

"Badger," Eveningstar replied grimly. "You haven't seen one have you?"

Falconflight shook his head stepping to his leader's side. "Nothing."

"Okay good. We drove it out, but we don't know where it went," Eveningstar replied.

"Hopefully toward DayClan," Orangestar muttered, and the warriors around him nodded.

Eveningstar blinked. "Let's get going. And let's hope that Rainstar won't stir up trouble."

"Trust her to do something like that," Creekfall muttered beside Hailstorm.

Eveningstar nodded for Orangestar to take the lead, then he jogged forward, glancing up at the sky. Hailstorm followed his leader's gaze and saw the moon, climbing higher and higher above their heads.

Hailstorm turned as Bronzepelt came up beside him. "Are you nervous for the Gathering?" the red tom asked.

Hailstorm shivered. "I think every cat here is."

Bronzepelt sighed and nodded. "Who knows what Rainstar will say to defend herself and her Clan?" The older warrior turned and looked over his shoulder. "Oh, look who's coming," he commented.

Hailstorm glanced behind him. Cat silhouettes were making their way toward the two Clans' patrols.

Eveningstar stopped as Sunfur paused beside him. "What?" he asked.

"NightClan," Gravelpelt meowed, and Sunfur pointed.

Orangestar dipped his head as Beechstar approached the two patrols. "How is NightClan, Beechstar? Are you recovering after the battle?"

Beechstar blinked slowly. "We're all fine. But grief still haunts our hearts," he sighed.

Eveningstar dipped his head. "Our losses will be felt for many moons to come."

"Are we going to announce the deaths?" Gravelpelt asked Eveningstar, anger sparking in his eyes.

"Of course!" Mapleleaf, the NightClan deputy, growled. "We owe it to them. And DayClan needs to know how many cats they killed in their heartless attempt to drive us out."

"That might make them feel prouder," Orangestar warned, "that they managed to weaken you, even a bit, might make them arrogant."

"But we're not just going to ignore the fact that our cats died," Goosefur, the dark brown tabby NightClan tom, retorted hotly.

"I think we should announce the cats' deaths. Rainstar will definitely announce her Clan's deaths," meowed Sunfur

"Of course she will," Creekfall growled.

"Then I'll announce our cats' deaths." Beechstar concluded.

"And I will announce Twigfoot's," Eveningstar added.

Orangestar looked up at the moon. "The Gathering starts at moonhigh. We should get moving."

Every cat nodded, then continued through DayClan's moor, the wind gently rustling the grass around them. Eventually the Thunderpath veered away to the left and the cats traveled through the silent grassland without the disturbance of Twolegs.

Hailstorm looked around him at the three Clan patrols walking together. How could Rainstar still think DayClan was so strong when DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan were *all* against her? Hailstorm shook his head.

"You look worried."

Hailstorm turned and saw Crystalheart, DuskClan's medicine cat. "A

little," he admitted to the white she-cat.

Crystalheart looked around the group of traveling cats. "Where are Goldheart and Yellowpaw?"

"Oh," Hailstorm sighed. "They had to stay at camp with two of our warriors. They were attacked and injured by a badger they met on the dawn patrol."

Crystalheart nodded thoughtfully. "Was Eveningstar on that patrol?" she asked.

Hailstorm turned to her in surprise. "How did you know?"

"His cuts are fresher than every other cat who was at the DayClan battle," she meowed. "They're very recent."

Hailstorm nodded, eyeing her warily. She knew so much. It was weird.

The DuskClan medicine cat looked ahead, her bright blue eyes staring after Gingerfur, who was slowly wobbling beside Orangestar. Gingerfur hadn't been at the DayClan battle, had she? Hailstorm didn't remember seeing her there. So why did she look so weak?

Crystalheart murmured a hasty goodbye to Hailstorm then raced to her Clanmate's side and helped her. Hailstorm blinked in confusion.

"She's having kits," a pale brown she-cat with a darker face and tail meowed. Hailstorm recognized her, but her name slipped his memory. "I'm Mushroomcloud," she meowed, as if reading his mind.

Hailstorm nodded. "I'm Hailstorm."

Mushroomcloud nodded. There was a silence following this, and the two warriors walked along in silence. Hailstorm looked up. The full moon was approaching moonhigh, and feathery gray clouds drifted by it.

"Oh, thank StarClan we're out of DayClan territory," meowed a small voice.

Hailstorm looked down at Flowerpaw and Ripplepaw, two NightClan apprentices, whose shoulders were sagging in relief as the three Clan patrols crossed the far DayClan border. The Pointed Mountain loomed ahead, shadows darkening its rocky surface where the moonlight didn't touch.

"Almost there," Orangestar urged Gingerfur as she panted beside him.

Hailstorm looked around at the giant mass of cats. Creekfall and Gravelpelt were talking with Blizzardclaw. Goosefur and Pantherclaw were lashing their tails angrily, while Snowpaw nodded vigorously. Eveningstar, Beechstar, and Falconflight were deep in conversation, while Mapleleaf and Sunfur were talking quietly to each other behind them. To Hailstorm's left, Twilightfoot was talking to two DuskClan elders: Fallingrain and Pidgeonclaw. And to the right, Sparktail, Icedapple, and Swantail were walking side by side, and Bronzepelt was trotting after them with Raypaw beside him.

Hailstorm looked ahead again as they reached the top of a grassy hill scattered with gorse bushes and large, lichen-covered boulders. The scraggly bushes dotted the stone, their roots clinging around the sharp edges. They'd just reached the base of the Pointed Mountain.

Hailstorm took a deep breath and followed Eveningstar and Beechstar up the steepened slope. He dug his claws into the gravel and hoisted himself onto the next ledge. Orangestar passed him, trying to catch up with Falconflight. Creekfall and Raypaw followed right behind Blizzardclaw, and Goosefur raced swiftly behind them.

Hailstorm let out a long exhale as he reached the top. DayClan was already there, glaring at the three Clans' patrols. Hailstorm raised his nose into the air. It was DayClan's *own* fault that their Clanmates were dead; neither DawnClan, DuskClan, nor NightClan had anything to be ashamed of. It was *DayClan's* problem.

Rainstar sat on the Lightning Tree, and growled, "Finally! You're as slow as sap flowing up a hill in leaf-bare!"

"Oh, but Rainstar," a mottled gray-brown tom from DayClan sneered. He sat below Rainstar on the roots of the Lightning Tree, white chest glinting silver in the moonlight. "They didn't want to come here unless they had all of their patrols together."

The DayClan cats around him laughed.

He must be the new deputy if he's sitting there; only deputies sit on the Lightning Tree's roots, Hailstorm thought. He recognized him from the Gatherings before, and from the battle, but he didn't remember his name.

"Of course! How could I *not* have guessed!" Rainstar meowed with a laugh, flicking her tail at her deputy to be quiet. "Now are you going to join me and start this fox-dunged Gathering or sit there like scared mice?" She sounded more impatient than furious. Maybe the death of her mate, Burningwood, had actually saddened her.

Good. She deserves to feel pain. She caused so much in the other three Clans, thought Hailstorm bitterly.

"We usually wait until moonhigh to start the Gathering." Orangestar narrowed his eyes at Rainstar. "Until then, we talk amongst ourselves." Cats from DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan nodded at the DuskClan leader's words.

Hailstorm looked up. The moon hadn't yet reached moonhigh, but it was close.

"Fine. Visit your precious little friends," Rainstar growled impatiently, staring upwards at the full moon. The clearing was still. Eveningstar and Beechstar shared a suspicious glance. Orangestar shrugged. "Are you going to talk or not?" Rainstar snapped, moving her gaze back to the cats in the clearing.

The clearing immediately shifted nervously as cats moved around to talk to one another. Gravelpelt and Eveningstar joined Blizzardclaw, Mushroomcloud, and Falconflight, whispering to one another and shaking their heads. Snowpaw trotted towards Cliffsand, and Raccoontail followed. Both DuskClan cats greeted the NightClan warrior cheerfully, tails swishing.

Two DayClan cats passed him, noses high in superiority: a gray tabby tom and a dark brown she-cat. Hailstorm recognized both from the battle: Clayfur and Hawktuft. Songtail stayed beside Weedfoot and Foxfang, with three young cats, one an orange tabby she-cat, one a dark red tom, and one a black- and white-patched she-cat. Hailstorm recognized them. But from where?

Suddenly he remembered. They were Rainstar's kits: Flamekit, Emberkit, and Stormkit! Were they apprentices now? The three cats had grown in the past half-moon since he'd first seen them beside the Thunderpath in NightClan's territory. They had looked pretty big even then. *They were probably five-moons old then, and they're now apprentices*, Hailstorm realized.

Hailstorm turned as light orange fur caught the corner of his eye. Raypaw was walking across the clearing, Ripplepaw and Flowerpaw behind him. They were heading toward Rainstar's three kits, who had started wandering away from the warriors they'd been sitting by. Hailstorm watched Raypaw, Ripplepaw, and Flowerpaw nervously. Why would they want to go near them? They were *Rainstar's* kits!

Hailstorm got up and followed them. Raypaw turned as Hailstorm reached them, and Flowerpaw and Ripplepaw paused mid-step.

"I'm going to join you," Hailstorm told his Clanmate.

Raypaw nodded, then turned to the NightClan apprentices. "Oh, Flowerpaw, Ripplepaw, this is Hailstorm." Flowerpaw smiled and Ripplepaw blinked in greeting. Hailstorm flicked his ears at them.

Raypaw nodded, then turned. He approached the three new DayClan apprentices, who turned to watch them.

The orange tabby she-cat glared through slitted eyes. "We don't want to talk to you."

"Oh come on, Flamepaw, we can *talk* to other apprentices. It's the Gathering. I'm Stormpaw, by the way." Stormpaw stepped forward, her black and white pelt shining eerily familiar in the moonlight.

Hailstorm was struck at how much this young cat looked like Rainstar. She had the same pure-white fur and the same sparse black patches dotting her pelt. The only difference was that Stormpaw didn't have her mother's icy-blue eyes; instead, they were a dark, grass-green.

Stormpaw was continuing. "...my brother and sister, Emberpaw and Flamepaw." Stormpaw glanced at Raypaw, who blinked at her.

Hailstorm cleared his throat. "Oh, I'm Hailstorm."

Raypaw continued to stare at Stormpaw. Hailstorm nudged him in annoyance.

"Wha'?" Raypaw blinked obliviously.

Stormpaw smiled at her paws. Then she quickly shook it away. "Oh, this is Raypaw," she told her littermates.

"How do *you* know his name? He's a *DawnClan* cat!" Emberpaw growled to Stormpaw, voicing Hailstorm's own thoughts.

Stormpaw blinked and stared down at her paws, looking embarrassed. "Um—"

"Patrol," Raypaw spoke up.

Hailstorm blinked and narrowed his eyes. *Since when do DayClan and DawnClan cats exchange names on patrols?* Hailstorm thought.

"Huh." Flamepaw narrowed her eyes.

There was a silence. The voices of the other cats in the clearing filled Hailstorm's ears.

Flowerpaw spoke up, breaking the silence. "I'm Flowerpaw." She looked at her brother and nudged him.

"And, um... I-I'm Ripplepaw."

"Are you scared to say your own *name* ?" Emberpaw snorted, narrowing his eyes at the gray tabby tom.

"Oh, be nice," Stormpaw snapped.

"Easy for you to say. You don't remember that cat do you? He was there on the patrol that killed Lightningkit," Flamepaw spat.

Ripplepaw looked terrified, and managed to stammer, "I-It's not my fault!"

"It's your *Clan's* fault," Emberpaw growled.

Ripplepaw cowered.

"Leave him alone! It was *not* NightClan's fault!" Flowerpaw growled, cream fur bristled.

"This is a Gathering. There's a truce!" Stormpaw hissed angrily at her littermates. "Just drop it!"

"Drop it?" Emberpaw turned on Stormpaw, looking furious. "*Drop* it?"

"This is a Gathering," Stormpaw repeated, holding her ground.

"Stormpaw's right," Flamepaw growled. "Let's go find some other cats to talk to. We don't need more trouble with *them* ," she spat the last word.

Emberpaw sniffed, then turned and walked after his sister. "Yeah."

Flamepaw turned around and saw Stormpaw, who hadn't moved. "Come on, Stormpaw," she meowed commandingly, much like her mother.

Stormpaw scuffed the ground with her front paw. "I'm going to stay here."

"Fine. Talk to those worthless excuses for cats. See what I care." Then she and Emberpaw turned tail and stalked away.

Ripplepaw and Flowerpaw glared after them. "We're leaving too," Flowerpaw growled. "Let's go find Swantail and Mapleleaf, Ripplepaw. They're much better than those dung-faces." The two

NightClan apprentices stalked off, tails high.

Stormpaw looked hurt.

"Don't worry about them," Raypaw began awkwardly.

"What did you expect?" Hailstorm growled, not feeling sympathy for the DayClan apprentice. "You're *Rainstar's* kits. And can't you see that your littermates hurt them?" He pointed at Flowerpaw and Ripplepaw, eyes narrowed.

Raypaw glared at Hailstorm. "Leave her alone. Can't *you* see that she doesn't like the way her siblings acted? She tried to be nice!"

"But she *can't* be nice," Hailstorm muttered. "Being born to Rainstar, raised by DayClan, trained beside her fox-hearted Clanmates..." Hailstorm thought bitterly of how Stormpaw's own father, Burningwood, had helped kill Twigfoot. Anger flamed in his heart. "You can't live in DayClan and be nice. That *entire* Clan is cursed and evil."

Stormpaw hissed and flattened her ears, tears in her eyes. "Leave me and my Clan alone! You don't understand what your Clan has done to my mother and to DayClan!"

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes. "Of course Rainstar would say that about the other Clans. But *DayClan* is the one causing damage to the other Clans, and your fox-hearted mother—"

"Don't call my mother fox-hearted!" Stormpaw snarled. She lashed out with her claws, narrowly missing Hailstorm's nose. She regained her balance, then widened her eyes. She slowly started backing away, as if she couldn't believe what she'd just tried to do.

"You truly are your mother's daughter," Hailstorm hissed. "A true DayClan cat."

Stormpaw flattened her ears and turned tail, running toward the DayClan crowd.

"Now look what you've done," Raypaw growled.

"Oh, you're standing up for her now?"

"I'm just trying to make you see that you can't judge a cat by its parents, or by its Clan!" Raypaw muttered angrily. "She was trying to be friendly!"

"Her father helped *kill* Twigfoot!"

"I know, but *she* didn't do that; she had no part in that battle." He sighed, then looked up at the sky. "Let's get back to our Clan. The Gathering's about to start."

Hailstorm opened his mouth angrily, but realized his Clanmate was right. "Yes, let's go." He dragged himself across the clearing silence, with Raypaw following. Then he thought of something. "So, what did you mean when you said you met Stormpaw on a patrol—" He stopped short. Raypaw was gone.

Where'd he go?

"Let's start the Gathering!" Eveningstar yowled from atop the Lightning Tree. Rainstar sat on the opposite branch, glaring at the crowd. Beechstar was settling down beside Eveningstar. Orangestar nudged Gingerfur, then jumped up beside Eveningstar and Beechstar, eyeing Rainstar suspiciously.

Songtail snorted beside Weedfoot and Emberpaw. "Still scared of us," the gray-brown tabby she-cat jeered.

Eveningstar cleared his throat, and the clearing fell silent. "Thank you," he meowed, his gaze flickering to the huddle of DayClan cats. Then he turned to Orangestar and Beechstar, ignoring Rainstar completely. "Would one of you like to speak first?"

Beechstar stepped forward. "Thank you," he dipped his head, then turned his pale, blue- green gaze over the clearing, eyes narrowed. "First I'll start with the good news. Flowerpaw and Ripplepaw have been apprenticed, and they are training hard to support their Clan."

"Flowerpaw! Ripplepaw!"

Beechstar waited for the clearing to fall silent again, then he raised

his voice to an angry yowl. "And now, as every cat here knows, Rainstar and the rest of DayClan attacked our camp and tried to drive us out." Cats from DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan nodded grimly, glaring at the DayClan cats around them.

"If every cat knows about it, then you don't need to talk about it," snarled Rainstar, clearly not wanting to bring up DayClan's defeat.

"*I* will choose what I announce," Beechstar retorted calmly. He straightened up and continued. "We lost four of our cats to DayClan." Beechstar glared at Rainstar, eyes glittering with absolute hatred. "Bushtail, our faithful medicine cat who'd served us selflessly for countless moons, has passed on, and now Icedapple takes on the role of our medicine cat."

Hailstorm blinked in sorrow, watching Icedapple raise her head proudly, not wanting to let her mentor down. Her white and silver fur was ruffled in the wind, and her pale blue eyes were spilling over with tears.

"And Brownwar and Ravenheart have also joined StarClan. The older queens were always loyal and raised our warriors to be who they are today, and our Clan will miss them greatly. And lastly, Greenwood, one of our elders, was killed trying to protect our kits, and we will always honor his spirit and bravery." Every NightClan cat looked up at the stars as Beechstar finished. "We hope that they have made it safely to StarClan and that our pain will heal in time."

"Brownear! Ravenheart! Bushtail!" Mapleleaf lead the chant, and soon most of the clearing was calling out the dead NightClan cats' names.

Beechstar dipped his head and stepped back, motioning for another cat to speak. Rainstar raised her nose to the air and opened her mouth, but Orangestar glared at her. "I'm speaking. You don't deserve to announce your fox-dunged news until the rest of us have."

Rainstar looked surprised, but before she could argue, Orangestar spoke again. "We were glad we could help NightClan, and we thank StarClan that we didn't lose any cats." He paused and dipped his

head to Beechstar, then meowed, "This past moon, we named two new warriors: Raccoontail and Snowfall."

"Raccoontail! Snowfall!" the cats in the clearing shouted.

When the noise faded out, Orangestar purred, "And Gingerfur has found out she's having kits. My kits."

Gingerfur raised her head proudly from the DuskClan crowd.

Surprised and happy murmurings filled the air as the DuskClan leader announced this. Kits were always a good sign. *And we could do with just about any good sign right now*, Hailstorm thought grimly.

"Congratulations." Eveningstar dipped his head to the DuskClan leader. Orangestar dipped his head in return, then stepped back.

Eveningstar now stepped forward, before Rainstar could insist on speaking next. He raised his voice and looked over the clearing, eyes narrowed and ears flattened.

"At the battle," he growled, "My deputy and my own brother, Twigfoot, was killed." He paused as the DawnClan cats muttered bitterly amongst themselves and bowed their heads in grief. "We have honored his spirit, and, in his name, I named the new deputy of DawnClan: Sunfur."

Sunfur blinked in gratitude as she sat on the roots of the Lightning Tree beside the other Clan deputies.

Eveningstar raised his tail for silence, then yowled, "Also, we spotted a badger earlier today, and Sparrowtail, Prairiefoot, and I drove it off, though we don't know where it went. So I'm warning you to keep an eye out for it."

There was a worried muttering sweeping across the clearing, and many cats exchanged fearful glances.

Eveningstar stepped back and growled, "Now you may speak, Rainstar."

"I don't need your permission," the DayClan leader snapped. Then

she turned to the cats in the clearing. "At the battle—" she began.

"The one that *you* started," Pebbletail muttered in disgust. The cats around her nodded bitterly with flattened ears.

If Rainstar heard the NightClan warrior's comment, she didn't show it. "A group of cats shredded Heatpool." Her blue eyes were filled with sadness, but mostly anger, about her former deputy's death.

"Yeah, only after he *murdered* Twigfoot!" Gravelpelt snarled with more ferocity than Hailstorm had ever seen in him before, and Hailstorm recalled sadly that his father had been Gravelpelt's and Eveningstar's brother.

"Heatpool deserved it!" Eaglefeather spat at Rainstar, brown and black pelt bristling.

Rainstar glared at them with icy blue eyes. "QUIET! I didn't interrupt Eveningstar, Beechstar, or Orangestar when they accused DayClan of caus—"

"Accused? *Accused* ?" Mapleleaf echoed in disbelief, his ginger fur spiking and his teeth bared in a furious snarl. "You outright *attacked* our camp!"

"There's *no* justification for what you did!" Duckflight hollered angrily from the crowd.

A chorus of yowling followed the NightClan warrior's statement.

"Silence!" Rainstar shrieked, looking ready to kill. "I attacked because NightClan murdered one of my kits!"

Chapter 6

A shocked hush swept across the clearing. Rainstar was breathing so heavily and angrily that it looked like she had just sprinted to the DawnClan camp and back.

Beechstar's neck fur began to rise as he glared furiously at the DayClan leader, while Eveningstar looked uncomfortable. Orangestar, however, was looking between Beechstar and Rainstar and back again in disbelief, jaw dropped.

Silence hung in the air like a thick fog. Then, gradually, whispers began to fly through the air all across the clearing as Rainstar's words sunk in. The DayClan cats were glaring furiously at the NightClan patrol, but the NightClan cats stared them down, sitting taller. The whole of the DawnClan and DuskClan patrols had widened eyes and were staring at the two Clans in shock.

Orangestar managed to stammer, "Your kits? Y-You have kits?"

"Yes," Rainstar snarled, spit flying. "I had four, but NightClan killed one of them, and now I have three, who—" she laughed hollowing, "—by the way, are apprentices now. Lightningkit would be an apprentice with them, but now thanks to NightClan, she'd dead."

"Wait a moment," Blizzardclaw meowed, facing up to the NightClan cats. His yellow eyes were narrowed in disbelief. "You *killed* a kit?"

"So you're saying," Falconflight asked from the roots of the Lightning Tree, voice filled with disgust as he glanced at Mapleleaf beside him, "that we helped you fight a battle that you practically deserved?"

"We fought alongside murderers!" spat Twilightfoot, his black and white fur bristling.

Angry yelling and bitter arguments broke out in the clearing. Hailstorm glanced at Eveningstar in panic. Out of all of DawnClan,

only he, Eveningstar, Raypaw, and Twigfoot had known that NightClan didn't murdered Lightningkit.

Eveningstar seemed to understand Hailstorm's urgent glance, because he stood up and hollered, "Silence!"

Orangestar and Beechstar were still glaring at each other mutinously, tails lashing, as if they hadn't heard Eveningstar. Eveningstar opened his mouth to speak, but Orangestar cut him off, seeming to forget he was even there.

"Is it true?" Orangestar spat furiously at the NightClan leader. "We helped you fight off DayClan because you *killed Rainstar's* kit?"

"My Clan isn't murderous," Beechstar shot back with his teeth bared.

Eveningstar began, "Now, Orangestar, don't start—"

Orangestar whipped his head around and hissed. "Don't tell me what to do!" he snarled.

Eveningstar flattened his ears in shock and narrowed his eyes.

The clearing broke into wild mutterings again as the NightClan and DuskClan leaders argued. Tension crackled between the Clans like lightning as the accusations flew.

"Quiet!" yowled a voice. It was Lilyfoot, DayClan's medicine cat. "Do you want to upset StarClan?" She was staring at the moon. Clouds were drifting around it, threatening to hide it at any moment. Lilyfoot then turned to the leaders angrily. "You are behaving like kits! All of you! Why don't you talk it out, like proper leaders would?"

"Talk out cold-blooded *kit-murder* ?" Orangestar spat, not angling his response at Lilyfoot at all, but staring furiously at Beechstar.

"Lilyfoot," Rainstar meowed calmly, though anger was burning in her blue eyes at the interruption. "You should know better than to interrupt a leader's discussion." Rainstar looked pleased to finally have support from Orangestar and DuskClan, to finally have some cat backing up her justification for the battle, and Hailstorm knew

she wasn't pleased to have Lilyfoot try and stop it.

"She has more sense than you!" Duckflight shot back angrily. "She's right; you're behaving like a bunch of kits!"

The angry shouting began again.

"I'd like to speak!"

The clearing fell silent and Hailstorm turned to see Swantail staring up angrily at Rainstar and Orangestar. Then she turned to look at Beechstar. "I have something to say about this." Beechstar narrowed his eyes at the she-cat, but said nothing. Swantail lashed her bushy white tail then snarled, "NightClan cats aren't murderers! Why would we ever harm a kit?"

"Ask Rainstar," spat Clayfur, gray eyes narrowed dangerously. "She was there."

Swantail shot him a look of fury. "Rainstar didn't see anything happen. She arrived after one of her kits had already died. I was there. I saw what happened; Rainstar did not. Robintail, Ripplepaw, and I were on patrol, and we heard a sound from beside the Thunderpath; and we thought that it was an intruder, that it was something dangerous that could threaten our Clan. So we jumped forward to scare it away, but we saw that they were kits. We tried to stop them, but one of them ran onto the Thunderpath and... she was killed by a monster."

"See?" Rainstar growled. "They killed Lightningkit!"

Goosefur took a step forward. "No, it was the monster's fault. She ran onto the Thunderpath, and the *monster* killed her, not a NightClan cat."

"Because *you* scared her!" Applefang hissed, tail thrashing.

"You weren't there! You have no right to talk!" Hailstorm snapped.

"Oh, and *you* were?" Weedfoot sneered, claws sliding out.

"Yes, in fact, I was!" Hailstorm retorted.

"Liar!" Songtail spat.

"It's true," Eveningstar yowled. "Twigfoot, Raypaw, Hailstorm, and I saw it all happen."

"And you didn't do anything about it?" Beechstar growled, rounding on Eveningstar.

"We deal with our own problems," Eveningstar hissed. "It was DayClan's and NightClan's problem. If we had intervened, who knows what troubles DawnClan could've gotten into."

Rainstar glanced sideways at Eveningstar, an angry glint in her eyes. Eveningstar didn't seem to notice; he scanned the entire clearing, then raised his voice and yowled, "We were there before both Rainstar and the NightClan patrol. The four kits were lost and were talking about how they shouldn't have left the camp. They tried to find their way out, and that's when the NightClan patrol came. Lightningkit ran straight into the path of the monster." He paused. "NightClan did *not* kill Lightningkit." He turned and narrowed his eyes at Rainstar.

Robintail let out a growl and looked up at Rainstar. "So it's your fault your kit is dead! You let them wander outside of your camp! You didn't keep an eye on them! It was not NightClan's fault. We were defending our borders from intruders like all four Clans do."

"*I* wasn't watching them! I was on patrol!" Rainstar spat, then she turned to the clearing and glared at the crowd of DayClan cats "It's your fault then, Frostwhisker!" Rainstar snarled. The white-furred warrior looked scared, muttering something Hailstorm couldn't catch.

Creekfall looked up at Rainstar. "So you realize that now? You blamed NightClan before thinking about what actually happened?"

Blizzardclaw growled. "Yeah, the battle could have never happened if you'd thought about it first!" Cats around the white DuskClan warrior began to nod.

Rainstar was too shocked to speak. But Emberpaw and Flamepaw

stood up. Flamepaw raised her voice and snarled, "NightClan scared our sister! There would not have been a battle if NightClan hadn't scared us! We were kits! What do you expect?"

"You wouldn't have been scared if you hadn't wandered away!" Eaglefeather growled.

"We were kits!" Emberpaw spat, eyes filled with burning fury.

"No more than you are now!" Creekfall retorted.

Stormpaw stepped forward to shield her littermates from the hostile glares of the warriors around them. She lashed her tail, squaring up to Eaglefeather and Creekfall, even though they were twice her size.

Growls filled the air, echoing across the black sky.

"STOP!" Fernpaw yowled above the commotion. Lilyfoot stood beside him, anger and disapproval in her eyes as she stared at the cats in the clearing. Fernpaw's pelt was bristled, and he lashed his red and black tabby tail. "What's done is done! The battle is over! If we can't find peace there'll be another battle around the corner. Now listen to what Rainstar has to say, quietly, before you upset StarClan!"

Hailstorm was taken aback by the small medicine cat's words.

The clearing fell into a shocked silence, and all the cats looked up at Rainstar as she shook her head to clear away her thoughts. She stepped forward and, eyes narrowed, she meowed, "At last some cat has some sense." Then she cleared her throat and began again. "As I was saying before this... chaos... happened: Burningwood, my own mate, was killed in the battle, along with Cougarfang, one of the strongest warriors in DayClan, and Heatpool, my deputy. So now, since Heatpool is gone, Bristlepine is the new deputy," Rainstar finished proudly.

The mottled gray-brown tom sitting on the roots of the Lightning Tree raised his head in superiority, his white paws and underbelly eerily reflecting the moonlight. His claws glinted in the dark as he flexed them proudly, and his yellow eyes were narrowed, daring

any cat to speak out against him.

Rainstar nodded in approval at the gray-brown tom, then continued. "And my three kits are now apprentices."

"You already said this," Gravelpelt muttered beside Hailstorm.

"Bristlepine is mentor to Flamepaw, Weedfoot is mentor to Stormpaw, and Songtail is mentor to Emberpaw," Rainstar meowed, her voice filled with authority as she looked down at her kits.

The three young cats looked up at their mother and raised their heads. Emberpaw had his head raised high and his chest puffed out. Flamepaw stared up at her mother, looking up at her with ambition deep in her orange eyes. Stormpaw looked more nervous than her littermates, but she puffed out her black- and white-patched fur proudly and closed her eyes as the cats called out the new apprentices' names.

"That's all." Rainstar stared down at her kits, pride glowing in her blue eyes. Then it was gone and she growled, "DayClan is done."

"Anything else to add?" Orangestar asked his Clan. At least his voice sounded calm again. His and Beechstar's pelts were lying flat, and they seemed to have got over their previous quarrel.

The DuskClan cats shook their heads.

"DawnClan?" Eveningstar asked, looking relieved to see the two leaders calmer.

The DawnClan cats also shook their heads.

Rainstar swept her gaze over her Clan in question, but didn't speak a word.

"Oh, what about Bumblefrost?" Songtail growled suddenly, standing up to face her leader and glaring at DawnClan as she mentioned her brother's name.

Hailstorm stared at Songtail in confusion and worry. *What about Bumblefrost? And what does DawnClan have to do with him?*

Rainstar was on her paws in a heartbeat, obviously knowing what the young gray-brown warrior was talking about. "Oh, yes." Rainstar let out an angry hiss. "Bumblefrost went missing about a moon ago. We found his scent by the river, mixed in with DawnClan scent," she growled.

Every cat from DawnClan stared at each other in surprise. What in the name of StarClan was Rainstar suggesting?

"DawnClan has one of our warriors," Rainstar snarled.

"What?" Eveningstar leapt to his paws in shock. "We don't have any of your cats!"

"Then explain what the DawnClan scent was doing on my territory a moon ago with Bumblefrost, and why he disappeared!" Rainstar shot back.

"We don't have Bumblefrost!" Eveningstar repeated in anger. He turned to face the DawnClan group, more fury in his eyes than Hailstorm had seen in a long time. "Have any of you been in DayClan territory?" he growled.

Hailstorm widened his eyes. Of course they hadn't! Every cat from DawnClan shook their heads in confusion, eyes darting across the clearing wildly.

"See?" Eveningstar turned back to Rainstar. "No one from DawnClan has been on your territory!"

"But of course they're lying!" the DayClan leader snarled.

Sparktail stood up. "Wait! Eveningstar!"

Every cat widened their eyes at the red warrior. Hailstorm's jaw dropped. Was Sparktail the one DayClan had smelled? She wouldn't! She couldn't! She was a loyal DawnClan warrior! She always had been!

"You?" Eveningstar was clearly just as surprised.

"No!" Sparktail shook her head and widened her brown eyes. Then

she glanced around her and spoke up. "I just think I know why DawnClan scent was on DayClan territory." She sounded solemn.

"Because it *was* you," Bristlepine spat at Sparktail.

Sunfur rounded on the DayClan deputy. "Let her speak!"

Sparktail dipped her head to Sunfur, then looked up at Eveningstar again, sadness in her light brown eyes. "It was Echoheart and Whispersong."

"What?" Now Hailstorm was completely lost. "But they left nearly a moon ago—"

"Yes!" Sparktail shouted, nodding her head. "DayClan scented DawnClan cats on their territory a moon ago, and Echoheart and Whispersong left a moon ago!"

"But what about that DayClan cat's scent on our territory a moon ago?" Eaglefeather yowled.

"Maybe it was Bumblefrost," Gravelpelt growled. "He disappeared a moon ago."

"Then did Bumblefrost go *with* your two cats?" Lilyfoot asked, tilting her head and sounding just as confused as every other cat in the clearing looked. "But—"

Hailstorm turned as Songtail spoke, her voice a low growl. "He did."

"You knew too?" Rainstar hissed, leaning forward angrily.

"No," Songtail answered, her eyes narrowed. "I realized it just now. It makes sense," she growled, lashing her tail. "He went with them because he loved one of them." The clearing was dead silent, in too much shock to interrupt. "Ever since Bumblefrost went to his first Gathering, he'd changed. He began sneaking out. I confronted him, but he always had prey. There was no way I could prove his midnight meetings to anyone," Songtail growled. "He always had a clean pelt, washed of any scents he didn't want any cat to know about."

"Midnight meetings?" Weedfoot repeated, and Songtail nodded, eyes narrowed.

"With *whom* ?" Frostwhisker demanded.

"Whispersong," Songtail snarled coldly.

"What?" Sparktail burst out. "But she wouldn't—"

"She did!" Songtail snapped. "Why else would his scent be mixed in with their scent? And why else would they have disappeared at the same time?" Songtail growled. "Whispersong and Bumblefrost met at their first Gathering, and they left on a walk to talk to each other," she spat, sounding absolutely disgusted. "Next Gathering: they disappeared. Gathering after that: gone. He'd sneak out of camp to meet her; I know it. And now they've fallen in love. My brother, falling for a *DawnClan* cat!" she hissed in disgust. "And now they've left the Clans together."

"But what about Echoheart then? Why would she leave?" Bronzepelt exclaimed.

"Who cares? That's three traitors that are gone," Foxfang snarled. "Good riddance if you ask me."

"Well no cat asked you," Hailstorm snapped.

"But they seemed like decent cats," Snowfall pointed out sadly.

"So what? They're *traitors* !" Flamepaw spat. Her eyes were filled with a fire that sent chills racing down Hailstorm's spine. She was only an apprentice; how could she feel this strongly about the subject? She hadn't even known Echoheart or Whispersong! And if she'd seen Bumblefrost, she couldn't possibly remember him that well! She'd been a kit when he'd left; kits and warriors hardly ever interacted!

"They betrayed their Clans. They're mouse-brained fools," Emberpaw added, tail lashing. He glanced up at his mother for approval.

Hailstorm shuddered; he knew that Echoheart and Whispersong

hadn't left to betray their Clans. Goldheart had told DawnClan that they'd left because StarClan had sent them! But what Bumblefrost was doing with them still confused Hailstorm. Could Songtail be right? Had Whispersong fallen in love with the DayClan cat?

"What should we do if they come back?" Foxfang asked, anger glittering across his orange eyes.

A chorus of angry yowling filled the air:

"Banish them!"

"Drive them out!"

"Shred their sorry fur!"

"Enough!" Eveningstar yowled angrily. "They're not even here! We'll deal with them when they come back!"

"If they come back," Weedfoot muttered.

"One thing is for sure," Songtail snarled. "If Bumblefrost comes back expecting us to welcome him like a hero, I will personally drive him off." The gray-brown she-cat lashed her tail and flattened her ears against her head menacingly. "He betrayed his Clan and the warrior code; I'll give him some wounds to remember that by. And trust me, once I've dealt with him, he'll never want to set paw on DayClan territory again. He's not a DayClan warrior anymore; he's a traitor. And traitors never leave unpunished."

Chapter 7

Hailstorm sat near the fresh-kill log, eating a shrew in silence, listening to Sparktail talking urgently with Rustypelt about last night's Gathering.

"You know when Echoheart and Whispersong left a moon ago, and we tracked them and found DayClan scent on our territory?" Sparktail was meowing.

Rustypelt nodded.

"Well, it was apparently Bumblefrost that we smelled," Sparktail murmured.

"Bumblefrost?" Rustypelt exclaimed. "Isn't he that young DayClan warrior?"

"Yes. But here's the strangest part: Rainstar announced last night that Bumblefrost disappeared a moon ago, which is when Echoheart and Whispersong left." She sighed deeply. "So, after insisting to DayClan that DawnClan hadn't kidnapped Bumblefrost, we figured out that the reason that their warrior disappeared was because he... well, he left with Echoheart and Whispersong."

Rustypelt nearly choked on his meal. "They left *together* ? Echoheart, Whispersong, and a *DayClan* cat left together?"

Sparktail nodded.

"Do you think he had a dream too?"

Sparktail shook her head. "I don't know. But Goldheart said that his dream warned that 'the *two*' would leave, not the three."

"But why else would he go with them?" Rustypelt asked, confusion in his amber eyes.

Sparktail lowered her gaze. "Songtail gave a long and angry speech

about Bumblefrost's growing disloyalty after his first Gathering, where he met a cat who seemed to change him, a cat who, according to Songtail, he fell in love with."

Rustypelt narrowed his eyes. "What? Who?"

Sparktail let out a very long sigh and stared at her paws. "Whispersong."

Hailstorm widened his eyes as Rustypelt spat out his meal and leapt to his feet. "What? Whispersong *changed* him? She changed a *DayClan* cat and fell in love with him? I don't believe a word those DayClan cats say! They're just trying to trick us."

"I... I think it's true," Sparktail murmured solemnly. "Didn't you notice a few moons ago that Whispersong was frequently gone at night?"

"But... but she always had prey," Rustypelt stammered, as if willing himself to believe what Sparktail was saying was false.

"Did you ever see Echoheart's expressions whenever Whispersong brought back prey after night hunting? She looked suspicious, and I always wondered why Echoheart would feel suspicious of her sister hunting. But she knew about that DayClan cat."

"Echoheart *knew* ?"

"I think so, but I'm just guessing. It all fits together though," Sparktail muttered.

"But what would Echoheart think when Bumblefrost decided to go with them to the mountains? Certainly *he* didn't have the dream!"

"I guess Whispersong persuaded her. But... oh, Rustypelt, how could we let our daughter fall in love with a *DayClan* cat?" Sparktail asked miserably.

"It was her choice," Rustypelt muttered, eyes filled with disbelief and disapproval.

Sparktail blinked. "But what will happen when they get home?"

Rustypelt didn't reply, and Hailstorm guessed the gray-brown warrior didn't even know how to answer that question.

Hailstorm blinked. What *would* happen when Echoheart and Whispersong got home?

* * *

Hailstorm nudged Raypaw. "We're going hunting."

"Why?" Raypaw asked. "I'm supposed to have my assessment at sunhigh."

"Really?" Hailstorm asked, surprised. It was about time he was made a warrior!

"So why do I have to go hunting with you?" Raypaw repeated.

"Sunfur asked me to go hunting and to take you along; I guess she's sending out other patrols with more warriors and doesn't need as many on hunting patrols." Hailstorm shrugged.

The orange tabby apprentice blinked, then nodded. "Fine. So long as we're back by sunhigh; because I'm *not* missing my assessment."

Hailstorm nodded. "Deal."

Together the two toms left the camp and headed in the direction of the meadow.

Suddenly movement caught Hailstorm's eye, and he prepared to spring. A blue jay hopped on the roots of the Great Pine, pecking the ground for food. But before he could make his kill, Raypaw dashed forward, shoving his large paws on top of the surprised bird.

"That was mine!" Hailstorm complained as Raypaw buried the blue jay proudly.

"Early hunter catches the most prey," Raypaw told him cheerily, flicking his thick tail over Hailstorm's ears. Hailstorm shook his

head in amusement and frustration, then followed the orange tom through the forest.

By the time they reached the meadow, Hailstorm and Raypaw had each caught another piece of prey and had buried it in the forest.

Hailstorm took a deep breath of fresh air as the breeze blew across the grassy field. The river's roaring grew louder and louder as he and Raypaw neared it. Raypaw trotted ahead to the riverbank, his thick orange tail swishing and his large orange paws kneading the ground as he paused beside the reeds.

Suddenly a flash of gray-brown fur caught Hailstorm's eye from across the river. He lifted his nose into the air, and the breeze carried the scent of DayClan to him. His neck fur bristled. Even though they were actually on their side of the border, Hailstorm felt suspicious of Dayclan cats, especially after that recent battle. Hailstorm sniffed the air again. A cat-scent pierced his scent-glands, the scent of a cat he'd seen recently: the new deputy of DayClan, Bristlepine.

Hailstorm looked to his right, watching Raypaw slink behind the reeds beside the river. Hailstorm crept after his Clanmate and crouched beside him, wondering, with suspicion, what DayClan was up to now. He watched as the mottled gray and brown pelt of the DayClan deputy emerged from behind a clump of tall grasses, Weedfoot beside him. Songtail stepped after the first two warriors, eyes narrowed, ears swiveling, and nose toward the ground, as if she was going to take a very detailed report of the territory to Rainstar when she got back.

The grass rustled again and three small cats burst forward, leaping across the moor excitedly. Hailstorm narrowed his eyes as he realized who they were: Emberpaw, Flamepaw, and Stormpaw. Their mentors must have taken them patrolling.

Raypaw hissed beside him, "Why are we hiding? We're on our *own* territory. And it looks like DayClan it's doing something normal for once: training apprentices."

"But they're *Rainstar's* kits," Hailstorm pointed out.

"So? They're still in their own territory," Raypaw meowed.

Hailstorm shrugged.

"We'll look like cowards for hiding," Raypaw growled as he trotted out of the reeds.

"Raypaw!" Hailstorm hissed after his Clanmate, but it was too late. Raypaw paused beside the damp bank downstream and remarked the border.

Hailstorm shook his head, realizing that Raypaw was right, and followed him down the riverbank. If they hid, they'd make DawnClan seem weak, which could come across to DayClan that they were an easy target. And DawnClan didn't need any trouble.

"Hailstorm, Raypaw," growled a voice across the river. Hailstorm turned as Bristlepine spotted them, lashing his tail. "What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's none of *your* business," Hailstorm scoffed, sniffing indignantly at the deputy's bold question. He had *no* right to ask that, *especially* given all that DayClan had done in the past moon! Hailstorm narrowed his eyes. "We're on our side of the river. Or are you afraid of a scent-marker?"

Weedfoot flattened his ears. "DayClan is not scared of a *smell* ," he retorted sharply.

"Then why question what we're doing, on our *own* territory?" Hailstorm shot back, pelt bristled. Now he was *sure* that DayClan was up to something. Even *DayClan* had never became so worked up over seeing two DawnClan cats on *DawnClan* territory.

Flamepaw hissed beside her mentor, Songtail, eyes narrowed to angry slits.

Raypaw fixed his stare on the DayClan cats across the river, meeting their narrowed eyes evenly and with confidence. But as he met the intent green gaze of Stormpaw, he immediately looking away, ears twitching in what Hailstorm thought was embarrassment. Was he remembering the Gathering?

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes and glared at them all. "Keep your noses out of DawnClan business," he meowed angrily.

"Keep *our* noses out of *your* business?" Emberpaw growled. "Who was it fighting for NightClan at the battle, when that was between *DayClan* and *NightClan* ?"

"Yes, it's your fault our father is dead!" Stormpaw hissed directly at Hailstorm, avoiding Raypaw's gaze completely.

"Its your fault *my* father's dead!" Hailstorm retorted bitterly.

A silence hung in the air, and the tension seemed to crackle like thunder, in which both DawnClan and DayClan cats glared at each other with hatred. Hailstorm narrowed his eyes, but forced his fur to lie flat. They didn't need a border fight, especially when no cat had even *crossed* the border!

"Just stay on your side of the border," Weedfoot snarled, teal eyes dark with revulsion. His Clanmates stood beside him, nodding.

"Says the cats who stole NightClan prey and tried to drive them out of their own camp," Hailstorm retorted with a hiss.

Emberpaw let out a growl. Flamepaw and Stormpaw narrowed their eyes and stood rigid beside Weedfoot, Songtail, and Bristlepine, who lashed their tails.

"Come on," Bristlepine growled to his Clanmates. "Rainstar is expecting a report."

"Yes," Songtail hissed, staring pointedly at the DawnClan cats. "Rainstar needs every bit of information for her next *plan*."

Hailstorm froze.

Bristlepine glared at Songtail, so intently and with so much fury that Hailstorm thought he might actually attack her.

"Next plan?" Flamepaw asked, orange eyes shining with curiosity. She seemed to have forgotten that Hailstorm and Raypaw were still standing there, and she had turned all of her attention to Songtail,

Weedfoot, and Bristlepine.

"What is it?" Emberpaw stared eagerly at the warriors.

"Rainstar will tell you when *she* decides," Bristlepine growled, still glaring at Songtail. Then he whisked away through the grass with Weedfoot behind him. Emberpaw and Flamepaw followed the warriors quickly, and Songtail was right after them, tail hanging after the deputy's furious glare. Stormpaw cast one last glance at Hailstorm and Raypaw, then dashed after her Clanmates.

Hailstorm stared after them in terror. What plan did Rainstar have now?

* * *

Raypaw paced back and forth in front of Hailstorm, worry in his eyes. They were sitting in front of the Great Pine, pondering what the DayClan cats had said.

"I don't think we should tell the Clan that Rainstar's got a new plan. We don't even know what it is," Hailstorm meowed quietly, foreboding filling his chest. "It'd just frighten our Clanmates, and, without much information on it, fear will be caused for no reason. And reckless fear can make us weaker and more vulnerable, which can cause disaster."

"I suppose," Raypaw breathed heavily, staring into the distance. "They may have made it up *just* to cause fear, and to make us an easier target."

"But did you see Bristlepine's expression when Songtail said Rainstar had a new plan? He looked ready to claw her ears off! I don't think they announced it on purpose; Bristlepine definitely didn't want us to know about it."

"Yeah, I guess." Raypaw paused his pacing and turned his orange gaze to Hailstorm. "We will tell Eveningstar if we find out more, right?"

"Of course we will. But there's no need to cause unnecessary fear right now."

Raypaw nodded.

"Besides," Hailstorm meowed, looking up at the sun above their heads. "You've got an assessment to get to."

Raypaw's head jerked up and his eyes brightened. "Right!" He turned tail and jogged back toward the camp, Hailstorm right behind him.

Sunfur and Sparktail were waiting for Raypaw as the two cats entered the camp. Hailstorm passed them and heard Sunfur meow, "Sparktail and I will be holding your assessment." Raypaw nodded eagerly and Sunfur added, "The sooner we get out into the forest, the more time you'll have."

Their voices trailed away as they headed out of the camp.

By evening, Raypaw had finally returned, head held high. Sunfur and Sparktail went to speak to Eveningstar immediately, and afterwards they brought great news. Raypaw had passed.

"I'm going to be a warrior!" Raypaw boasted, chest puffed out in pride.

Cherrykit and Lilackit, Raypaw's two younger sisters, scrambled around him, eyes wide with awe.

"About time, don't you think?" Clovertail asked, padding up behind Hailstorm.

Hailstorm nodded. Raypaw been training for longer than most apprentices trained. "Is his ceremony going to be tonight?" he asked Clovertail.

"I think so. He's been an apprentice long enough," his sister purred, warmth in the pale green depths of her eyes.

Hailstorm watched Raypaw. The orange tom was meowing teasingly to his younger sisters as they climbed on his back.

Cherrykit squealed in delight as Raypaw carried her across the clearing with her on his back. Lilackit mewled in protest and scrambled after Raypaw. "I want a badger ride!" she whined.

Raypaw glanced down at the dark tortoiseshell she-kit in amusement. "After Cherrykit."

Lilackit grunted and scowled at Cherrykit as she laughed, riding across the camp on Raypaw's back. They circled back, their pelts blending into the shadows as the daylight faded to dusk. The clouds glowed orange and the yellow sky was filled with warm air.

Hailstorm took a deep, refreshing breath. Green-leaf had come at last.

Hailstorm turned back to Raypaw as Cherrykit let out a squeal. The red long-furred she-kit flopped onto the ground with a thud, and Lilackit burst into laughter as she watched her sister. Then she raced forward on her tiny white paws and leapt onto Raypaw's back. "My turn!" she declared.

"Lilackit!" Sagetail scolded her kit. "Raypaw is having his warrior ceremony! He needs to be clean, and you're just messing up his pelt!"

"It's alright," Raypaw purred in amusement at his mother. "We're having fun."

Sagetail narrowed her eyes. "You can't go to your warrior's ceremony looking like you've been pulled through a bramble bush backwards!"

Raypaw opened his mouth to protest. "I can wash later—" he began.

"You can wash now," Sagetail told her older son sternly.

"But Mother! Cherrykit gotta turn and I didn't!" Lilackit argued stubbornly.

"No 'buts'," Sagetail scolded. "You can play with the other kits." She pointed at Needlekit, Pinekit, and Rosekit playing in the fronds of bracken beside the nursery. Cherrykit and Lilackit cast one last

glance at Raypaw, then dragged their paws toward Aspenleaf's three kits.

Hailstorm purred in amusement, then turned as pawsteps approached him. Yellowpaw was walking toward him, her yellow-orange tabby pelt glowing in the sunset.

"Moonshine has gotten much better these past few days," Yellowpaw announced.

Hailstorm let out a long exhale of relief. And, thinking of cats in the medicine cats den, his mind flashed to yesterday, before the Gathering. "How are Sparrowtail and Prairiefoot?" he asked urgently. Hailstorm still hadn't visited them since the badger attack. "And is Eveningstar completely healed?"

Yellowpaw sighed. "Eveningstar is just fine, and Sparrowtail is healing as well. Their scratches are now scabbing, and Sparrowtail should be able to leave the den by tomorrow."

"Didn't she have a broken paw?"

Yellowpaw shook her head. "No, she just stubbed her toe and wrenched a claw. But it's fixing up well."

"Good, and what about Prairiefoot?"

Yellowpaw opened her mouth, avoiding Hailstorm's eyes, but nothing came out.

"And Prairiefoot?" Hailstorm demanded, heart sinking at Yellowpaw's expression.

"His shoulder wound is getting infected," Yellowpaw murmured quietly.

"Can't you fix that?" Hailstorm's meow was edged with fear.

"Goldheart and I are trying, we really are," Yellowpaw lowered her gaze. "But it's spreading, and he's getting weaker."

"But you *must* heal him!"

"We're trying," his sister told him earnestly.

"Then why aren't you with him now?" he challenged angrily, fear for his former mentor making him snap.

"Goldheart is."

Hailstorm didn't answer. He avoided his sister's eyes as she padded away, fear and anger wrenching his heart.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!" Eveningstar's voice rang across the clearing.

Hailstorm looked up in curiosity and trotted to the base of the large boulder, joining Sparktail and Rustypelt. Eaglefeather, Meadowheart, and Sunfur sat on his other side, while Twilightfoot, Spruceclaw, and Copperleaf settled down behind him. The three elders sat shoulder to shoulder, watching Cherrykit and Lilackit chase each other in circles around them. Clovertail sat behind Hailstorm, with Raypaw next to her.

Once all of DawnClan sat in the clearing, Hailstorm turned his gaze back to Eveningstar. "Green-leaf has come," he yowled. "And what better way to celebrate it than naming a new warrior?" He turned his brown gaze on Raypaw. "Raypaw, come forward." The orange tabby jumped to his paws and leapt up beside his leader. "Raypaw, you've been training well for over two seasons, and Sparktail and Sunfur tell me that you're ready to become a warrior," Eveningstar meowed. Then his gaze darkened with sadness. "Even though Twigfoot should have been the one to assess you and be here with us tonight, he will be watching this moment from StarClan. And I assure you that the lessons he taught you will guide you for the countless moons to come." Raypaw nodded, eyes shining with grief, then he glanced up at the appearing stars. Silverpelt shone dimly as the gray sky faded to black.

Eveningstar raised his voice so it echoed off the stone walls of the camp. "I, Eveningstar, leader of DawnClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you

as a warrior in his turn." Eveningstar lowered his gaze back to Raypaw. "Raypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Raypaw's voice didn't falter as he stated firmly, "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment on you shall be known as Rayclaw. StarClan honors your strength and willpower, and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Rayclaw!" Sagetail and Bronzepelt led the chant, Lilackit and Cherrykit soon joining in. The young kits bounced around their parents, calling out their older brother's new name.

Hailstorm raised his voice to the sky. "Rayclaw! Rayclaw!" he howled.

Rayclaw puffed out his chest proudly, his tail resting on his large orange paws. He raised his chin and stared up at the stars. Hailstorm knew he was remembering Twigfoot. *He's proud of you*, Hailstorm assured the new warrior mutely. The dead deputy would be proud of every cat he'd known, and he'd watch over them for the countless seasons to come.

"Rayclaw," Eveningstar hollered over the noise. Every cat silenced again. "By tradition, you must sit silent vigil over the Clan tonight."

"While every other cat gets a good night's sleep!" Lilackit whispered playfully to Cherrykit, bouncing towards Hailstorm now.

"We should help!" Cherrykit whispered back. "We could sit outside the nursery and—"

"We're not warriors yet, silly furball," Lilackit playfully murmured.

Rayclaw nodded in pride, then leapt from the High-stone. Everyone raced forward to congratulate him. Hailstorm made his way forward to greet the new warrior, with Clovertail, Gravelpelt, and Aspenleaf behind him. Rayclaw raised his head proudly.

After the Clan began departing to their dens, Sunfur nodded at

Rayclaw, who padded to the camp entrance to begin his vigil. The newly-named warrior's orange eyes blazed with pride as he watched his Clanmates file into their dens. Hailstorm settled down beside Clovertail as they reached their own nests in the warriors' den. He closed his eyes, letting the soft breathing of the cats around him lull him to sleep.

Heartbeats later, it seemed, a piercing shriek filled Hailstorm's ears. His eyes flew open and he jerked his head up. Gray dawn light seeped through the branches of the warriors' den, and the air was cold. Cats stirred around him, groggily perking their ears.

Another sob echoed across the camp, and Hailstorm quickly got to his paws and followed his denmates urgently out of the warriors' den. Sagetail was pacing the clearing, and Rayclaw sat beside her, his head bowed and his ears flattened. Sagetail's head was lifted as she let out another loud wail of agony.

Eveningstar leapt off the High-stone and ran toward Sagetail. "What happened?" he demanded. Cats crowded around the distressed queen as she widened her gray-blue eyes in shock, shaking her head as if she wasn't able to speak.

"Sagetail, what is it?" Bronzepelt called urgently as he pushed past the crowd of cats surrounding Sagetail and raced forward, his pelt bristled in worry as he stared at his mate.Sagetail let out a cry, her claws tearing at the grass. "Cherrykit and Lilackit are gone!"

Chapter 8

Echoheart padded alongside Whispersong and the young to-be, Star That Shines Bright, as they took a walk around the outside of the cave. Bumblefrost had gone on a hunting patrol early this morning with the Tribe cats, and Star had asked Echoheart and Whispersong if they wanted to go on a walk to talk about something. What that something was, Star hadn't yet explained.

"So," Echoheart began, turning to look at Star. "What did you want to talk to us about?"

The small silver tabby she-cat looked toward her with her one blue and one green eye. "I've been thinking about this for a while now, ever since you arrived. You came here for a reason, right? For something important. You didn't just want to explore the mountains."

"Yeah." Whispersong nodded slowly.

"What is the reason?" Star asked as she jumped onto an icy stone ledge.

Echoheart glanced at her sister, then sighed, deciding to get straight to the point. "There is a danger back home, back at our home. And we were told that mountain cats could help us."

Star looked intently at them. "Who told you?"

"StarClan," Whispersong murmured, gray tail twitching.

"Our warrior ancestors," Echoheart clarified.

Star sat down on the ledge, deep in thought. She waited for Echoheart and Whispersong to join her on the stone before continuing. "So you had a dream from your ancestors?"

Echoheart nodded cautiously, now becoming wary of the small Tribe cat. "How did you know?"

Star avoided the question, and continued up the rocky cliffs. "What was it about?" she asked quietly.

Whispersong looked sideways at Echoheart, and Echoheart blinked in confusion.

Star turned to look at them. "I think I can help you. Just tell me what your dream was, and I'll tell you mine."

"*You* had a dream? From *StarClan* ?" Whispersong sounded as if she couldn't believe her ears, and Echoheart didn't blame her.

"No, from the Tribe of Endless Hunting, my ancestors," Star meowed, walking further up the slope. They were in the shade, the tall peaks around them blocking the sun as it rose toward sunhigh.

Echoheart shivered. "Alright," she sighed. "In our dream, there was a creature, larger than any we'd ever seen. It was huge, and kind of fat, with lots of thick black fur."

"And it had a large head," Whispersong added. "With small black eyes and huge, deadly fangs and claws."

Star narrowed her eyes in confusion. "Huh," she muttered, shaking her head in what Echoheart thought was disbelief and wonder. "What does this mean?"

"What does what mean?" Whispersong asked, staring at Star, who had settled down on a flat rock covered in snow.

"I... I had a dream like that too," Star murmured. "Except... a bit different." She sat still as the stone around her, eyes distant.

Echoheart shot Whispersong a confused glance. *What does it mean?*

"You had a similar dream to mine and Whispersong's?" Echoheart murmured.

Star nodded distantly, still staring off into the distance.

"So do you know what this creature is?" Whispersong breathed.

Star shook her head absently, still sitting rigid. "No, but I will try to figure it out. Let's get back to the cave and ask Stoneteller."

"Stoneteller?" Whispersong echoed, sounding nervous.

Star nodded. "He's experienced a lot; he might know more about this than we do, and we might be able to work from there." She shook her head to clear her mind and then lead the way down the rocky hill. Echoheart was careful not to slip on the ice and snow as she leapt from ledge to ledge, loose pebbles flying.

Echoheart sighed and shivered. She, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost had been here for a half-moon, and she had begun to feel worried that they'd never figure out what these mountain cats could help them with, like StarClan had told them. But now Echoheart thought that maybe they were starting to be on to something.

But what does Star know about this danger? And what does the Tribe have to do with StarClan's prophecy?

Echoheart froze in her tracks as she remembered something, something from hers and Whispersong's dream with Whirlheart, Peachfur, Swampclaw, and Slatefur. Her mind flashed back:

Two eyes were glittering in the shadows of the forest. She had tried pointing them out to her mentor, but he couldn't see them. It was a sign!

Then the scene changed and she was suddenly in a grassy field talking to four cats with starlight sparking in their fur.

"What about the eyes?" she had blurted out.

The three StarClan cats had looked at one another knowingly. "StarClan didn't send that omen."

Echoheart's mind flew back to the present. She was standing rigid in the wind, but she hardly noticed the cold.

So that was who had sent the sign! That was the only explanation... It wasn't StarClan after all. It was the Tribe of Endless Hunting!

Echoheart's mind reeled.

Why did they send us a sign? she thought in confusion. Did StarClan send us here because they knew about the Tribe of Endless Hunting? But what does the Tribe have to do with us? The prophecy specifically said that with the whispering voice of two the forest, as one, will echo with light... the forest will echo with light, not the mountains.

Echoheart blinked. But then why would Star have a dream similar to Echoheart's and Whispersong's? Would this danger really affect both the Tribe and the Clans?

"Echoheart, you're falling behind! You're going to turn to ice at this rate!" Whispersong's shouting jerked Echoheart out of her thoughts.

Whispersong and Star were already at the base of the icy stone hill. Whispersong was looking up at her, almost as small as a rabbit from Echoheart's standpoint. Echoheart shook her head and leapt through the snow and down the slope. As she reached them, she meowed awkwardly, "Sorry, I guess I just got lost in my own thoughts." Star blinked in compassion, then turned and lead the way back to the cave. Echoheart glanced at Whispersong, whose brown eyes were filled with concern, and seemed to say, *what's wrong?*

Echoheart began walking beside her sister, many fox-lengths behind the small silver and white tabby to-be in front of them. "The Tribe of Endless Hunting sent the eye sign that I saw back in the forest," Echoheart blurted out to her sister.

Whispersong turned and stared at her in surprise. "How do you know?"

"It just makes sense."

"They really do have something to do with all this, don't they?"

Echoheart nodded. "I just don't know what."

"Maybe Stoneteller does," Whispersong murmured.

"Maybe."

Whispersong leapt over a frozen puddle and murmured to

Echoheart, "Do you think Star actually had a dream similar to ours?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't be taking us to Stoneteller if it wasn't important, right?" Echoheart meowed, still skeptical despite what she'd learned about the Tribe of Endless Hunting and their possible connection with StarClan.

Whispersong shrugged, then sighed. "I just hope that we can find the most about this that we can, because we need to get home."

Echoheart nodded. "I hope we can make it back before leaf-fall." She turned to her sister, who nodded in agreement. "Do you think it's green-leaf in the forest?"

"Maybe," Whispersong murmured, then she grunted, "It's hard to be sure though because of this stupid, constant cold weather; it seems like these mountains are a never-ending leaf-bare."

Echoheart nodded in agreement.

As soon as they reached the cave, Star lead them toward the back of the cave.

"Star, what are you doing?" a slim gray she-cat came forward toward them

Star blinked. "I'm taking Echoheart and Whispersong to Stoneteller."

"Why?" the she-cat inquired, sounding suspicious.

"Nothing's wrong, Fade," Star meowed, trying to reassure her Tribemate. Then, turning to Echoheart and Whispersong, she meowed, "Echoheart and Whispersong, this is Fade of Light at Dusk. She's a prey-hunter."

"Thank you for the introduction, Star," Fade muttered stiffly, narrowing her eyes. Then she whipped around and stalked away.

Star turned to them apologetically. "Some cats still aren't comfortable with strangers here, staying with us. The Tribe has never met cats from outside its territory. They don't know why

you're here," she meowed, staring at them importantly with a faraway look in her eyes.

Echoheart felt uncomfortable under the intense gaze of the young Tribe-cat. Then Star shook her head and turned to the gap where the entrance to the Healer's den lay. "Stoneteller?" she called out quietly.

The dark brown tom poked his head out of the cave. He looked at the three cats with confused, dark yellow eyes. "Yes?"

"We need to talk to you," Star meowed.

Stoneteller glanced between the three of them. "Alright. Come in," he muttered.

Echoheart looked at Whispersong, then followed Star and Stoneteller inside the small cave. She blinked away the darkness as her eyes adjusted. Stoneteller wrapped his thick tail neatly over his paws, and Star settled down beside Echoheart and Whispersong across from the brown tabby.

Stoneteller blinked. "What is it?"

Echoheart and Whispersong shared a glance, then looked over at Star. Star blinked her blue and green eyes and turned to Stoneteller. "Echoheart and Whispersong came to us for a reason, seeking our help," she meowed quietly.

Stoneteller nodded, staring at the two Clan cats with a knowing gaze.

"There is a danger back home," Whispersong spoke up. "The two of us," she blinked at Echoheart, "had a dream, sent to us by our warrior ancestors, StarClan."

Stoneteller nodded slowly. "I know why you came. I had a dream as well."

Echoheart blinked in surprise.

"The Tribe of Endless Hunting told me as I was sleeping that two

cats would come and seek out help from the Tribe. They said that your ancestors visited them and told them this."

"StarClan *visited* the Tribe of Endless Hunting?" Echoheart asked. "They can do that?"

"Apparently," Stoneteller murmured.

"What else did your ancestors say?" Whispersong asked.

Stoneteller sighed. "They said we need to be prepared to learn the truth. Something is interconnected here."

"I knew it!" Star exclaimed.

Stoneteller, Whispersong, and Echoheart stared at the small silver she-cat. "Knew what?" Stoneteller asked in confusion.

Star stared at the ground. "I... I had a dream as well."

"*What* ?" Stoneteller was obviously shocked.

Star blinked and nodded. "The Tribe of Endless Hunting was there... and they told me: 'Follow the stars; they will shape your destiny'."

Stoneteller said nothing; his face was blank and his eyes were distant. "Was this all they said?" he asked quietly.

Star nodded. "But there was a... a vision, too," she stared at her small paws, looking embarrassed. Echoheart could see that, although she sounded wise and seemed to know beyond what her Tribemates could see, she was still young, and she looked suddenly small next to the three older cats. The silver tabby to-be took a deep breath and meowed, "I-I don't know why th-the Tribe of Endless Hunting spoke to me, St-Stoneteller. Th-They don't want me to replace you, do they?"

"Replace you?" Whispersong stared at Stoneteller, the confusion in her eyes reflecting Echoheart's own.

The older tom sighed. "Usually... well, for as long as I can remember, only the Tribe Healer, the Teller of the Pointed Stones,

has ever received signs and dreams from our ancestors. No prey-hunters or cave-guards ever have, and certainly no to-bes for that matter."

Echoheart narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "Since Star is, well, getting dreams, does that mean she's your successor?"

Stoneteller sighed. "I don't think so."

"For season upon season, the Healer has chosen his or her successor as they become to-bes. The one that possesses special abilities to read signs or has connections with the Tribe of Endless Hunting," Star murmured. "I didn't have any of that until a few moons ago."

Stoneteller looked at the young she-cat. "You were born a prey-hunter, and that's why I chose for you to become one."

Star dipped her head. "I know." She blinked slowly and scrunched up her nose. "When the Tribe of Endless Hunting visited me, they never mentioned me leading the Tribe one day. They never said I was to replace you. But I had a vision of foreign cats, in a foreign land, with foreign ways. There was danger, a creature in the distance, the creature you described from your dreams," Star murmured, glancing at Echoheart and Whispersong. "But no matter how hard I tried to help the strange cats, they were always too far away." Star sighed. "I looked up, through... *trees*... more trees than I thought possible. Through the many, many branches shone bright stars, unfamiliar to my eyes but *feeling* familiar to my heart. The stars of the Tribe of Endless Hunting were far away, seeming distant, like an old memory. But the new stars, above the foreign cats, I seemed to recognize."

Echoheart blinked at Whispersong in shock and disbelief.

"All of a sudden, spirit-cats assembled around me, some recognizable, most unfamiliar. One was *completely* different. She had stars in her fur."

"But don't all of your ancestors have stars in their fur?" Echoheart exclaimed, shocked.

Stoneteller shook his head. "No, they are bright silver, with the sheen of ice."

Echoheart shared an amazed glance with her sister. Was the cat that Star saw, the one with stars in its fur, a StarClan cat?

Star continued. "The... the spirit-cats spoke; they told me what I told you: 'Follow the stars; they will shape your destiny'. And they were gone."

Stoneteller blinked. "Well. I'm sure of one thing. This dream isn't about the Tribe of Rushing Water. It's not about me. It's not about you becoming the next Healer. It's about you finding your destiny. You have a great destiny, Star that Shines Bright. And I think it lies with them." Stoneteller turned and looked at Echoheart and Whispersong.

Echoheart stiffened with shock.

Chapter 9

"Gone?" Bronzepelt sputtered in shock. "What do you mean, gone?"

"I mean they're gone! They weren't in the den this morning, and their nest was cold!"

Rayclaw was shaking his head. "It's all my fault. I—"

Eveningstar cut the new warrior off. "Rayclaw, stop blaming yourself. Sagetail's kits have simply wandered off; we'll follow their scent-trail and bring them back."

"But there's dangers out there, that badger—"

"Rayclaw—" Eveningstar began quietly, but Rayclaw didn't seem to hear him.

"I should have noticed them leaving camp! If they're hurt I'll never forgive myself..."

Eveningstar turned to the gathered cats around him. "Goldheart," he addressed the medicine cat when he saw him walking out from his den with Yellowpaw behind him. "Take Sagetail and Rayclaw away and calm them down. Bronzepelt, go with them."

Bronzepelt whipped around. "I could lead a search party! I could—"

"We need you here at camp," Eveningstar told him firmly. "Reassure your mate and son that the kits will be alright. We'll find them."

Bronzepelt opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it and followed Goldheart, Yellowpaw, Rayclaw, and Sagetail with his head bowed.

"I will lead the search party," Eveningstar meowed. "Creekfall, Hailstorm, Gravelpelt, and Sparktail, you will come with me."

Hailstorm widened his eyes then nodded, surprised at being chosen.

"Sunfur," Eveningstar continued, turning to the deputy. "Stay here and look after the camp. If something by chance took the kits, it might be back. I need you on guard."

"Yes, Eveningstar," Sunfur meowed, dipping her head and looking concerned.

"It's possible that they did leave the camp during the night," Eveningstar meowed. "We'll have to track them to be sure though. Hailstorm, I know how good you are at tracking. You found Echoheart and Whispersong's trail, and you can find Cherrykit and Lilackit's. Take the lead."

Hailstorm blinked in surprise, then nodded, sniffing by the camp's entrance. When he found no scent-trail, he headed up the hill that lead to the cliff on the backside of the camp. *Maybe they came back here.* Hailstorm lowered his nose to the ground, smelling older scents: Eaglefeather, Meadowheart, Rustypelt,...

Hailstorm shook his head. None of the scents were Sagetail's kits'. His nose brushed the grass and ferns as he moved forward, but he found nothing. No kit-scent. *Well at least they didn't fall off the ledge*, he thought in relief, realizing that if they had, they would have broken something for sure, or died. Hailstorm shook the thought away.

"Hey! I think I found their trail!"

Hailstorm turned as Creekfall called out. He ran down the slope to the pale silver tom, who was wrinkling his nose in disgust. His fur was on edge, and his tail was lashing.

"What—" Hailstorm started, but before he finished his question, he smelled what had made Creekfall's pelt bristle. A low growl rumbled in his throat and his claws tore at the ground.

"What did you find?" Sparktail asked, jogging toward them, Eveningstar and Gravelpelt right behind her.

"I don't think the kits went exploring," Hailstorm spat.

Eveningstar let out a snarl. "DayClan."

"Come on. We have to follow the trail. We might find something," Gravelpelt muttered.

Eveningstar nodded, brown eyes smoldering. "Let's go."

The four warriors followed the DayClan scent-trail through the forest with fur bristling.

"I'm surprised Rayclaw didn't see or scent DayClan cats. Or even hear them," Sparktail murmured.

Gravelpelt sighed. "The wind is blowing away from the camp. That would mean they were downwind."

"The wind would muffle their sounds and blow their scent away from Rayclaw," muttered Creekfall bitterly. "Clever."

"More like coincidence," Hailstorm spat. "If they were coming into DawnClan territory to kidnap our kits, the conditions lined up just right for them. Fox-hearted dung-faces."

Creekfall let out a growl. "They're lucky the kits decided to wander around the camp."

"And that the wind was blowing toward them," Sparktail added in disgust.

"What did *we* do to them?" Eveningstar muttered, almost to himself, and Hailstorm knew he was referring to DayClan.

Gravelpelt shook his head. "Trust Rainstar to come up with an idea like this."

Eveningstar stopped and sniffed the air. "I can't smell it anymore."

"Me neither," Gravelpelt muttered.

"You try, Hailstorm. We *have* to find their trail," Sparktail meowed determinedly.

Hailstorm nodded. He lowered his nose to the dirt, rubbing it in the grasses and ferns around the trees. Hailstorm stood up

triumphantly. "Found it!"

"Wow, Hailstorm. You *are* a great tracker!" Gravelpelt exclaimed, sounding hopeful.

Hailstorm half-smiled in embarrassment, then lead the way through the forest, following the faint scent-trail left behind by DayClan last night.

Hailstorm jerked his head up as he caught a whiff of the Thunderpath. He shook his head in disgust and frustration; the smell of the Thunderpath blocked out the scent of the kits and DayClan. "Fox-dung!" he spat. "I lost it."

"They used the strong odor of the Thunderpath to mask their scent," Eveningstar growled, glaring out at the moorland through the trees. "But I don't think we need a scent-trail to tell us that DayClan took the kits into their territory."

Creekfall let out a frustrated hiss. "Dung-faces!"

Hailstorm looked up and let his eyes follow the trail of the Thunderpath down to where it crossed over the river. He stared beyond it into DayClan's territory. Chills swept across his body.

"What are we going to do now?" Sparktail asked. "Sagetail's going to be hysterical."

"I know," Eveningstar muttered. "But she's going to have to face the truth. DayClan kidnapped her kits."

* * *

By the time Hailstorm, Eveningstar, Sparktail, Gravelpelt, and Creekfall returned the camp again, the wind had brought in thick gray clouds. The air had turned cold, and the rain had begun drizzling from the darkening sky.

A raindrop hit Hailstorm's nose, bringing him out of his thoughts. He shivered as he sat below the thin cover of the aspen trees above the camp. The clearing was full of tiny puddles, rippling wildly in the showering mist of rain. Hailstorm shivered again and sighed. He

was cold and his fur was damp, but he didn't feel like going inside the den.

Sagetail sat against Bronzepelt under the cover of a bramble bush, shaking with rage, fear, and sorrow. "I'll get those fox-hearted, dung-faced, good-for-nothing fleabags!" she spat.

Rayclaw was beside them, still sitting as rigid as he had earlier. His orange eyes were fixed on something in the distance, and his shoulders sagged. Creekfall was sharing a rabbit with Aspenleaf outside the nursery, but neither looked hungry. Needlekit and Pinekit tugged at each other's ears half-heartedly, while Rosekit's head was laid on her paws, staring at the rain. At the entrance to the camp, Clovertail, Meadowheart, and Sparrowtail were returning, carrying a squirrel, a raven, and two mice. But even the sight of more prey didn't improve the sodden mood of the camp.

Hailstorm sighed again and shivered.

Why had DayClan stolen DawnClan kits? They wouldn't want them for recruits, that's for sure. Cherrykit and Lilackit were old enough to know that they were DawnClan, not DayClan; they'd never train under Rainstar's rule or fight for her tyranny.

Hailstorm heard a grunt of pain, and he turned, shaken from his thoughts. It had come from the medicine cats den.

Goldheart let out a hiss, filled with worry. "Hold *still*, Prairiefoot."

Another weak gasp escaped the den.

Hailstorm shook his head in guilt and felt a prickling sense of fear. How could he forget? His former mentor was still in the medicine cats den from that badger attack on the dawn patrol! He immediately sprang to his paws and raced across the wet, muddy clearing and pushed through the dripping vines at the entrance to the medicine cats den.

Prairiefoot lay on his side on top of a dried blood stain. His breath was ragged and his limbs twitched. Goldheart was standing over him, and Yellowpaw had herbs by her paws, licking his fur

anxiously.

Yellowpaw looked up and jumped. "Hailstorm! What are you doing here?"

"I came to visit Prairiefoot. I... is he alright?"

Yellowpaw exchanged a glance with Goldheart, pushed away the herbs, and ushered Hailstorm out of her den. Hailstorm cast one last glance over his shoulder at his former mentor and the medicine cat before the vines swung back into place and blocked them from view.

"What's wrong with him?" Hailstorm demanded.

Yellowpaw blinked slowly, ears flattened. "I told you. His wounds got infected. He's... he's not getting better... he's getting worse."

The rain seemed to thicken.

It took many heartbeats for Hailstorm to process this, and by then his sadness had turned to anger. "What kind of medicine cats are you if you can't heal cats?"

Yellowpaw didn't flinch; she only bowed her head in defeat. "We're trying. We really are. But there's just some things you can't reverse. And in Prairiefoot's case, his serious infection is one of those things."

"You... you mean he's going to keep getting worse?" Hailstorm choked, feeling chills that had nothing to do with the rain drenching his fur.

"I think... I think so... but I-I can't be sure... Unless StarClan shows mercy and heals him..." Yellowpaw closed her eyes.

Hailstorm's anger at Yellowpaw changed toward StarClan. "And of course StarClan won't heal him. They don't *have* mercy. They took Fogtail, Ferrettail, Twigfoot, and Tulipkit; they made Echoheart and Whispersong leave because of a stupid dream they sent them; they *let* DayClan take our kits; and now they're trying to take Prairiefoot!" Hailstorm spat, tears spilling over. "They've abandoned

DawnClan!"

"They don't interfere with the waking world, Hailstorm," Yellowpaw told him sadly. "They leave what's meant to be meant to be. They may take our cats, but we can't lose faith in them. They let destiny take its course, as they should, but they watch over us, always." She paused and after, a long moment, sighed. "You should get some rest."

Hailstorm blinked the tears and raindrops from his eyes away but said nothing.

"I'm sorry Hailstorm. This is the one thing I hate about being a medicine cat," Yellowpaw murmured miserably. "Your Clan relies on you. The injured cats rely on you. And," she shut her eyes tight, voice faltering, "when you can't heal them, when StarClan has to take them, you feel like you've let your Clan down. They depended on you, and you couldn't do it. You couldn't save them... like... like Ferrettail..."

Hailstorm looked into his sister's green eyes, full of misery. He felt helpless. As helpless as Yellowpaw looked.

Hailstorm sighed. "Maybe... maybe Prairiefoot *will* get better, with you and Goldheart healing him. And... perhaps StarClan will save him after all..."

Yellowpaw let out a miserable breath and leaned against Hailstorm.

Hailstorm murmured in sympathy, "StarClan will guide you; they'll guide all of us."

Though, as he said this, Hailstorm couldn't believe it himself. Was StarClan really guiding them?

It didn't seem like it. Not in the slightest.

* * *

Hailstorm blinked open his eyes. He was in a grassy forest, the waning, oval-shaped moon dimly glowing above his head.

Hailstorm blinked. *How did I get here?*

He looked around. It didn't seem like any place he'd ever seen. The horizon looked blurry, and he felt as though he was standing on air, not on the forest floor.

What's going on? he thought. Then the realization hit him. *I'm dreaming.*

"Hailstorm."

Hailstorm whipped around, startled. A starry shape sat on a stone behind him, bathing the ground around it in a silver glow.

"Wh-who are you?" he stammered. But even as he asked this, Hailstorm widened his eyes in recognition. He knew the dusky, brown-furred shape that sat before him, now silver with starlight. Its pale green eyes stared warmly into Hailstorm's.

Hailstorm gasped. He'd known that face since birth. How could he forget? He raced forward on paws as light as air. "Oh, Twigfoot! I've missed you so much!" he cried out, rubbing his face in his father's starry fur. He drank in his scent, though, to his disappointment, it didn't smell quite the same: less like DawnClan and more like wet stones and starlight.

"Hailstorm. I've come to tell you something."

Hailstorm stared in his father in dismay. "Aren't you glad to see me?" he asked.

Twigfoot's green eyes filled with sadness. "There's no time for reunions now. Don't worry, Hailstorm. I will always watch over you. Don't you forget that."

Hailstorm straightened up, blinking away his tears. "What did you come to tell me?"

Twigfoot stared at him solemnly. "Tomorrow Prairiefoot will join StarClan. He is ready. All of his pain and suffering will end, and he'll be in a better pl—"

Hailstorm stared at his father in disbelief. "You can't take him! StarClan has taken so many of our cats! They took *you* away from us, they took..." he trailed off, not wanting to believe that his father was right... Prairiefoot wasn't going to die! He couldn't! Goldheart and Yellowpaw would heal him... they *had* to!

Twigfoot didn't seem to hear him. "But what I came to tell you, Hailstorm, is that no matter how much you think that StarClan is abandoning you, Hailstorm, you must press on. StarClan will *always* watch over you. Have courage, my son."

"But... but then how could StarClan stand by and watch DayClan take our kits?" Hailstorm stammered.

Twigfoot sighed, his eyes darkening. "StarClan has no control of the cats in the forests below us. We may have some power, but it doesn't extend to cats. StarClan is here to watch over you and guide you, not to take your freedom of choice away; I trust you know this by now, Hailstorm." The starry tom sighed. "Cats make their own choices; DayClan made a choice in stealing those kits, and now you must make a choice to right this wrong. StarClan will guide you, but will not control you."

Hailstorm stared at his father. How had his father become *even* wiser? And much did he, and the rest of StarClan, know about the fate of Sagetail's stolen kits?

Twigfoot spoke again. "Hailstorm, you have to be aware. The kits are safe for now. But Rainstar is using them against you. You have to be ready."

"You mean she's training them as apprentices for DayClan? But Cherrykit and Lilackit would never fight against their Clan!" Hailstorm gasped.

"Trust your instincts, Hailstorm. Trust your instincts and trust the guidance of StarClan."

"But Fa—"

"StarClan has told another cat. Trust StarClan. Trust your

Clanmates..."

Hailstorm stepped forward. "Wait! Who has StarClan told?"

But Twigfoot was fading, and his shape was slowly disappearing from sight.

"Twigfoot!"

"Have faith, my son. We will be with you, always... always..."

His voice faded out, echoing hollowly around the forest. Hailstorm closed his eyes and let out a wail.

Then suddenly he felt cold air washing over him, and he fell over into darkness.

* * *

"Prairefoot!"

Hailstorm's eyes flew open in a rush.

"Hold on, Prairiefoot, please!" It was Yellowpaw.

Hailstorm jumped to his paws, remembering his dream with a rush of fear. He raced across the clearing, other cats crowding around him. The entrance to the medicine cats den was surrounded by every cat in the DawnClan camp, anxiousness present all of their faces.

Goldheart appeared from his den, head bowed and tail dropping. "Prairiefoot... is dead."

The whole Clan let out yowls of shock.

"StarClan has taken another one of our cats!"

"They've abandoned us!"

"They don't care anymore!"

Hailstorm bowed his head in grief. Though his father had told him

of Prairiefoot's death last night, no amount of warnings could lessen the agony he felt. He had the urge to scream out curses at StarClan for taking another of his Clanmates away, but he knew that StarClan hadn't left him, that StarClan hadn't left DawnClan. Hailstorm had faith in Twigfoot's words, so he had faith in StarClan.

The Clan dispersed unsteadily as Goldheart and Yellowpaw carried Prairiefoot's limp orange body into the center of the camp. Water sprayed up from the grass as Prairiefoot's body touched the ground; the rain from yesterday still clung to the leaves and grass, dripping on their heads and wetting their paws as they walked.

Hailstorm sat in the wet grass and nosed his former mentor's fur.

"The infection still lives in his body," Goldheart warned. "Don't lick him."

Hailstorm blinked away tears and nodded weakly.

Aspenleaf nosed the orange body beside Hailstorm, leaning against Meadowheart and Sagetail. "Goodbye brother," they murmured together.

Brother? Prairiefoot was Aspenleaf's, Meadowheart's, and Sagetail's brother?

Hailstorm twitched his ears as he heard commotion coming from behind him. Rayclaw was trotting into camp, looking rather confused but happy at the same time. His jaws were empty.

Hailstorm blinked. Where had he gone? Obviously not hunting.

A sudden anger bubbled inside Hailstorm. How *dare* Rayclaw be happy when Prairiefoot had just joined StarClan, and when Sagetail's kits were still missing! How dare he sneak out of camp and not bring back prey!

"Where were you?" Sunfur asked the new warrior suspiciously.

"I went for a walk," Rayclaw meowed cheerfully, then he looked at the crowd of cats. "Why are they all crowded—"

"Prairiefoot just joined StarClan," Sunfur growled bitterly.

Rayclaw flinched. "What?"

Sunfur said nothing, but turned away.

Rayclaw looked guilty, and slowly dragged himself over to the crowd around Prairiefoot's body. He stared at his paws. Hailstorm eyed Rayclaw suspiciously, then laid down beside his former mentor and closed his eyes.

By sunhigh, most of the Clan had cleared up, and Rayclaw headed for the camp entrance again. Suspicion clawed through Hailstorm's body. He got to his paws and stalked after Rayclaw.

"Where are you going, Rayclaw?" It was Bronzepelt. "You already left this morning. You can stay in camp now."

"We're going hunting," Hailstorm reached Rayclaw's side and faced Bronzepelt.

The red tom narrowed his eyes. "Alright. Be back before dusk."

"We will," Hailstorm promised, then turned around, heading out into the forest and leaving Rayclaw by the brambles.

The orange tabby raced after him. "Hey, wait!"

Hailstorm didn't wait. He was going to find out where Rayclaw had been earlier, and he needed to be away from the camp in order to get Rayclaw to talk.

"Thanks for covering up for me," Rayclaw meowed awkwardly, catching up to Hailstorm easily with his muscled legs and large paws.

"Covering up for what?" Hailstorm growled. "You weren't going to go hunting, were you? So where *were* you going?"

Rayclaw sighed, avoiding Hailstorm's eyes. "A walk."

"Yeah right," Hailstorm retorted, still jogging quickly through the

forest. "You said you were going on a walk *last* time. You're lying."

Rayclaw flattened his ears. "You can't order me around."

"I know I can't. But you lied to Sunfur," Hailstorm growled. "The *deputy*."

Rayclaw sighed but didn't reply.

"Where were you going?" Hailstorm repeated, turning to look at the orange warrior.

Rayclaw stared at his paws. "Alright, fine. I wasn't on a walk. Well... I sort of was."

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes.

"I trust you, Hailstorm. You're my friend. If I tell you, you won't tell any other cat, right?"

"Depends on what it is," Hailstorm muttered.

"Please."

"Fine," Hailstorm growled, flicking his tail in annoyance. "*Fine*."

Rayclaw took a deep breath. "I *was* out trying to hunt earlier. I needed time on my own after... after my guilt of not noticing DayClan take my younger sisters. I reached the DayClan border, and I... I saw Stormpaw, the DayClan apprentice, remember her?" Rayclaw exhaled. "She was pacing the riverbank when I last saw her, but before I could sa..." Rayclaw cut off and looked away. "She walked away before I could, uh, watch her for, uh, very long."

Hailstorm snorted. "So were you going to see if you could spy on her again?"

"I..." Rayclaw hesitated, looked away, then muttered, "Well... uh, I guess."

He was still refusing to meet Hailstorm's gaze, and Hailstorm had a feeling there was still something Rayclaw wasn't telling him. "Let's

stay away from the DayClan border tonight," Hailstorm suggested. "Stop worrying about DayClan. I know you're upset about Cherrykit and Lilackit, but we should let the older warriors decide what we're going to do about it." He paused, adding, "That *is* why you wanted to spy on Stormpaw, wasn't it, to find out about Lilackit and Cherrykit?"

"Huh? Oh, yes," Rayclaw mumbled distantly, still staring at the ground as he walked.

Hailstorm blinked, then shook his head. "Let's hunt toward the NightClan border," he suggested.

Rayclaw shrugged. "Alright."

The two warriors trotted away from the descending sun and toward the Thunderpath.

Hailstorm kept glancing at Rayclaw. The young orange tom was staring at the ground, seeming to be lost in thought. Hailstorm heard him muttering to himself, but he could only catch a few of the words. "... mother... trust her..." Hailstorm had no idea what Rayclaw was mumbling about. He was about to ask him when he heard the swish of ferns behind him.

"Rayclaw? Hailstorm?"

Hailstorm turned. It was Sparrowtail and Eaglefeather. "What are you two doing out here? Did Sunfur send out *another* hunting patrol?" Eaglefeather asked.

"Not quite. We left on our own," Hailstorm replied.

"Us too," Sparrowtail meowed. "Why don't we hunt together? It'll be better that way."

"Sounds good." Hailstorm nodded and followed the two older warriors through the forest, heading in the direction of the NightClan border. As the four cats reached the Thunderpath, a monster raced past, spraying up water from a muddy puddle on the hard black surface.

"Yuck!" Rayclaw exclaimed as mud flung into his fur.

Hailstorm wrinkled his nose at the odor, then meowed, "We'd better turn around. There's not going to be any prey over here."

But as they turned, a voice rang out loudly, echoing from across the Thunderpath.

"Wait!"

Hailstorm spun around. A NightClan patrol was calling out to them: Robintail, Cliffsand, Goosefur, and Flowerpaw.

"Uh... do you need anything?" Eaglefeather called to them, obviously surprised.

"We need to ask you something," Cliffsand meowed from across the Thunderpath.

"Have you seen any sign of young NightClan kits? Two small black and white tom-kits?" Goosefur called, "Or have you by chance found any DayClan scent near this border?"

"Have your kits gone missing?" Eaglefeather asked in surprise.

Cliffsand, Goosefur, and Flowerpaw exchanged glances.

"Yes; two of them a few nights ago," Robintail growled, black and orange fur bristled. "We found some DayClan scents around the outside of our camp, and at first we thought it may have been faint traces from that battle... but now we think that DayClan may have taken our kits."

Hailstorm widened his eyes in shock, and Eaglefeather and Rayclaw let out gasps.

"DayClan stole your kits?" Sparrowtail meowed tensely.

"We believe so," Goosefur hissed, green eyes narrowed to slits.

"But... but we think DayClan stole two of our kits too!" Rayclaw burst out.

"What?" Cliffsand exclaimed, sharing bewildered looks with the other NightClan cats.

"It was a few nights ago too," Hailstorm meowed. "Cherrykit and Lilackit disappeared, and we found DayClan stench around our camp."

"So, DayClan had kidnapped NightClan *and* DawnClan kits?" Goosefur hissed.

"Do you think they've kidnapped DuskClan kits?" Robintail meowed, eyes narrowing.

"Maybe," Eaglefeather exclaimed, yellow eyes shining with fear.

Those fox-hearts!" hissed Flowerpaw, her bushy cream-colored fur bristling.

Hailstorm widened his eyes and turned to Rayclaw wildly. So *this* was what Songtail had been referring to when she had mentioned Rainstar's next plan; DayClan was kidnapping kits from the other Clans!

Hailstorm swayed.

Twigfoot had warned Hailstorm in his dream! He'd said: 'The kits are safe, for now. Rainstar is using them against you. You have to be ready'."

But *what* was she going to do to them? How would she use them against their own Clans?

Chapter 10

Hailstorm was lying beside Eaglefeather in the dew-strewn grass, chin resting on his front paws. A half-moon shone dimly through the trees, and pale silver moonlight flickered across the ground.

He, Sparrowtail, Eaglefeather, and Rayclaw had informed Eveningstar and the rest of the Clan about NightClan's two missing kits, and how NightClan believed DayClan had also stolen their kits. The Clan had been shocked, and most wanted to plan a battle on the DayClan camp immediately. But Eveningstar said that they'd need more information on DayClan's plan with the kits they'd kinapped before they could attack; otherwise, it'd be too risky.

Hailstorm sighed and shook these thoughts from his head. He glanced in front of him at Yellowpaw and Goldheart, who were about to leave for the Moonfall. Hailstorm had heard earlier from Yellowpaw that she was going to receive her full medicine cat's name tonight; Hailstorm wondered what it would be. She'd been Yellowpaw for so long that it'd be strange to get used to her new name. And even stranger: he wouldn't be there to see her named, like during warriors ceremonies. No one, except medicine cats, knew what happened during the full medicine cat naming ceremony. It was strange to Hailstorm.

"Ready, Yellowpaw?" Goldheart asked, emerging from his den. Yellowpaw nodded, excitement shining in her green eyes. Then they dulled, and she bowed her head, murmuring something to Goldheart that Hailstorm couldn't catch.

Goldheart's voice was stern but his eyes were filled with sympathy. "Prairiefoot's death wasn't your fault, nor mine. He's safe in StarClan now. You may even see him tonight at your naming ceremony."

This seemed to brighten Yellowpaw, and she nodded eagerly.

"We ought to be off," Goldheart meowed warmly to her, then looked over at Eveningstar, who dipped his head.

"Safe travels," Eveningstar meowed, stepping closer to them. "And make sure to find out as much as you can about DawnClan's and NightClan's stolen kits when you see the DayClan medicine cats, and find out if they kidnapped DuskClan kits too. That way we can think of a safe plan to rescue them as soon as possible."

Goldheart nodded. "Lilyfoot and Fernpaw aren't the kind to agree with this evil; we'll ask them."

"Thank you, Goldheart. I'll tell Sagetail; that should comfort her."

And with that, Eveningstar stepped back and let the medicine cats be on their way. Goldheart and Yellowpaw dipped their heads to Eveningstar, and they soon disappeared beyond the bramble barrier and into the darkening forest, side by side.

"Hailstorm?"

Hailstorm turned. It was Clovertail.

"You and I are on guard tonight," his sister meowed.

Hailstorm groaned inwardly. "Alright," he yawned.

Clovertail didn't look the least bit tired, and she stared sympathetically at him. "I can ask Sunfur if some other cat could take your pla—"

"No." Hailstorm shook his head firmly. "Last time I was on guard I fell asleep on my paws and Sunfur sent me back to the den to rest. I will not bail out again."

"Alright." Clovertail shrugged. "Let's go then."

Hailstorm followed his sister across the camp, passing their tired Clanmates along the way, all heading to their dens.

"Eveningstar and Gravelpelt are taking over at moonset," Clovertail meowed, sitting down a few fox-lengths from the bramble barrier.

Hailstorm looked up at the moon, which was climbing toward moonhigh, and realized what a long night they'd have. He sighed.

"Oh, come on Hailstorm. You did this for your vigil," Clovertail meowed. "We sat here all night, no talking. At least this is half the night and we can talk."

"That's true," Hailstorm murmured quietly.

"But we need to be on our best guard, better than ever," Clovertail meowed, a hint of a growl in her voice. "DayClan may try and come back to get Aspenleaf's kits."

Hailstorm nodded. "Yes," he growled. "I won't let those fox-hearts take more of our kits."

"We shouldn't see anymore trouble though, I don't think. Aspenleaf's kits know better than to leave the den with the threat of DayClan, but it's all a precaution, just in case."

"Let's hope they have sense and stay inside the nursery," Hailstorm muttered.

"They will. They're over five moons old now."

Hailstorm nodded. "Yes, not much longer and they'll be apprentices."

"Who do you think will mentor them?" Clovertail asked excitedly.

Hailstorm blinked, staring into the darkening forest. "Probably Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail; they haven't had apprentices yet."

Clovertail nodded. "Then maybe one of us will mentor the last kit!"

"I don't know," Hailstorm shook his head; he and Clovertail weren't very experienced warriors yet.

A silence followed this, and Hailstorm stared into the shadowed forest.

The night grew colder, the wind picked up, and the thin clouds soon grew larger and taller. They passed in front of the moon, blocking its silver light as it sunk below the treetops. Then complete darkness covered the forest as the moon disappeared from view.

Clovertail shivered beside him, looking like a fluffy, black ball of fur. "Looks like a storm's coming," she muttered.

Hailstorm nodded as the trees creaked in the wind and their leaves rustled violently. Hailstorm pressed closer to Clovertail. Soon a thick drizzle blew from the clouds. Hailstorm felt like he was standing beside the river. He shivered. The wind whipped his wet fur, chilling him to the bone.

The night droned on.

He could hardly think about guarding the camp in this weather, and he couldn't even see within ten fox-lengths outside the bramble barrier. He blinked the raindrops off of his eyelids and shivered again.

Clovertail scooted closer to him, her soaked fur pressed against his.

After what seemed like forever, Gravelpelt and Eveningstar emerged from their dens to take their place. Hailstorm blinked gratefully to the warriors, then followed Clovertail exhaustedly to the warriors' den. Hailstorm collapsed onto his nest, soaking wet all the way through to his skin. Clovertail curled up next to him, and they shared the little warmth they had, trying to fall asleep.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The rain picked up, coming down in torrents. The large drops leaked through the top of the den, dripping onto the cats below. Hailstorm shifted even closer to Clovertail.

Hailstorm's eyelids were heavy with exhaustion. He tossed and turned, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't fall asleep, and being wet didn't help.

The trees still thrashed in the violent winds, but the rain was lightening up. Hailstorm pictured himself out in the cold and guarding the camp, and he thanked StarClan that Gravelpelt and Eveningstar had taken his place.

A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the forest, silhouetting the shape of a cat sitting in the back of the den, and Hailstorm's heart

skipped a beat, startled.

The cat started moving, and Hailstorm's heart pounded faster. Then he recognized the large orange paws that stepped over his head. Rayclaw. Hailstorm was about to sit up and ask Rayclaw what in the name of StarClan he was doing, out of his sudden fright. But then he realized Rayclaw was probably going to use the dirtplace, and Hailstorm forced his body to relax.

Hailstorm watched the new warrior leave the den, ducking his broad orange head as the rain splashed him. But he didn't turn to the dirtplace tunnel.

Hailstorm sat up. Where was he going?

Rayclaw slunk across the ground, blinking in the rain. He looked around nervously, as if he didn't want anyone knowing what he was up to. Hailstorm narrowed his eyes and thought about following him, but by the time he could make his decision, the orange warrior had disappeared.

Hailstorm lied back down, confused.

Though before he could ponder it much longer, the steady drizzle of the rain finally lulled him to sleep.

* * *

Hailstorm stretched in his nest, the dampness in his fur making his muscles sore. He turned toward Rayclaw's nest, remembering last night. The orange tabby tom was curled up, fast asleep and still wet.

The storm had gone, and countless puddles now filled the camp. The sodden leaves glowed in the warm green-leaf sunlight and were dripping water onto the ground below.

Hailstorm yawned and stretched again. He ambled slowly out into the clearing, the water-strewn grass dampening his paws.

Eveningstar was heading to his den, while Gravelpelt was heading to the warriors' den. Both toms were dripping wet, their fur

plastered to their bodies.

Hailstorm heard giggling behind him as Aspenleaf's kits dashed through the camp, splashing in the puddles and racing to the fresh-kill log. Sagetail and Bronzepelt sat beside the large pine tree trunks, watching the three kits with sadness in their eyes.

Hailstorm felt anger surge inside him. DayClan still had Lilackit and Cherrykit.

Unless... Hailstorm shuddered.

No, he told himself. *Twigfoot said DayClan would use the kits against us, so surely that would mean they wouldn't kill them, right?*

Hailstorm shook the thought away vigorously and padded over to the fresh-kill pile. Hailstorm wrinkled his nose at the prey. Every piece was cold and wet from last night's storm. He sniffed over a droopy-looking pigeon and a stiff rabbit, his appetite disappearing.

He sat up and stared sadly at the wasted prey. He could see he wasn't the only one. Copperleaf and Spruceclaw were sharing a small falcon, wet and stingy. Copperleaf pulled on the meat, but it had become stiff and chewy. Spruceclaw wrinkled his nose and eyed it warily.

Rosekit, Needlekit, and Pinekit were prodding a wet blue jay. Rosekit murmured something to her brothers, bent down to try and take a bite, but came up, spitting. Pinekit and Needlekit looked up at their father, who narrowed his eyes in frustration.

Hailstorm sighed. The Clan needed more warm, fresh prey.

At least there's not much prey on the fresh-kill pile now, so not too much is being wasted, Hailstorm thought.

He got to his paws and made his way toward Sunfur, who was talking to Rustypelt and Sparktail. The three warriors turned as they saw Hailstorm.

"Yes?" Sunfur asked.

"The prey is stiff and cold and wet," Hailstorm told the deputy. "I think we should send out hunting patrols to get fresh prey."

Sunfur nodded. "Is no one eating it?"

Hailstorm shook his head slowly.

Sunfur blinked. "In that case...." She turned to Sparktail and Rustypelt. "Sparktail, you can lead one of the hunting patrols. Tell Eaglefeather to lead the other."

The dark red warrior dipped her head and left.

"Rustypelt, would you take care of the old prey? Bury it outside the camp."

Rustypelt dipped his head. "I'll get another warrior to help me out."

Sunfur nodded, then turned to Hailstorm. "Thank you, Hailstorm," she meowed as Rustypelt trotted off. Hailstorm dipped his head and watched as the deputy leapt atop the High-stone and slipped into Eveningstar's den.

Hailstorm stared after the two hunting patrols as they stepped through the brambles. Sparktail was taking Moonshine and Creekfall with her, and Eaglefeather was taking Sagetail and Bronzepelt. Hailstorm hoped they would catch enough prey to feed the Clan; even if it meant sharing between multiple cats, at least everyone would have some food in their bellies until more prey was caught.

Hailstorm turned as Rayclaw passed him, heading over to sniff the fresh-kill pile. He immediately remembered last night, when Rayclaw had snuck out, so he followed his denmate.

Rayclaw looked at Hailstorm. "Did you eat any of this?"

"No," Hailstorm replied. "It's gone all stiff."

There was a silence.

Then Hailstorm launched into his question. "Why were you

sneaking off last night? I saw you leave the den, but you didn't go to the dirtplace."

Rayclaw immediately looked uncomfortable.

"Were you trying to spy on DayClan cats again? Or on *Stormpaw* again?" Hailstorm asked. Last time Rayclaw had snuck out, it had been to do just that. But now it was just getting suspicious, even more suspicious than it'd been last time, especially since he'd snuck out at night and during a storm.

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes when Raypaw didn't answer. "Were you going to spy on—"

"No," Rayclaw interrupted with a hiss, teeth clenched.

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Rayclaw's orange gaze burned like fire, and he growled, "Why are you so nosy? Keep out of my business!" Then he stalked away, large paws stomping through the muddy puddles as he headed for the warriors' den.

Hailstorm stared after the young warrior in anger. Rayclaw had been doing something he shouldn't have.

Hailstorm was sure of it.

* * *

Sunhigh was approaching when one of the hunting patrols returned. Creekfall, Sparktail, and Moonshine each carried a few pieces of prey, trotting proudly towards the fresh-kill pile, and behind the three warriors came the two medicine cats, returning from the Moonfall.

Hailstorm stared at his sister. Wisdom shone in her bright green eyes, and she looked seasons older than she actually was.

Clovertail rushed forward when she saw her. "Did you get your full medicine cat's name?" she asked with a flick of her black ears.

"Yes. I'm now called Yellowflower," she purred proudly.

As Eveningstar appeared from his den to congratulate Yellowflower, Goldheart padded up to him. "Eveningstar. Lilyfoot and Fernpaw weren't at the Moonfall."

The whole group of gathered cats let out gasps of shock, and every cat looked at one another in confusion.

"I think Rainstar forbade them to go," Goldheart muttered.

"Because she stole our kits?" Bronzepelt snarled, Sagetail beside him.

"She probably didn't want them to give away anything," Sparrowtail growled.

Eveningstar's tail was lashing.

"Are we ever going to see the kits again?" Meadowheart snarled.

Sagetail let out a sob.

"We *have* to find out what DayClan's plan for our kits is. Somehow we must," Rustypelt muttered. "Even if it's not from Lilyfoot or Fernpaw. Because we have to find a way to rescue them and bring them back."

Copperleaf shook his head. "But how? It's nearly impossible to get information about DayClan unless we can actually get a DayClan cat to tell us everything. But that'll happen when hedgehogs fly," he snarled sarcastically.

Moonshine nodded in agreement, ears flattened. "We all thought we'd get some information from DayClan's medicine cats, but it looks like Rainstar thought this too."

"She planned ahead," spat Creekfall.

A muffled whisper echoed to Hailstorm's left.

"I know what I have to do."

Rayclaw had spoken quietly, so quietly that Hailstorm was surprised he'd even heard him. The orange warrior was backing further and further away from the gathered cats. Hailstorm glanced around him, but it looked as if no other cat had heard Rayclaw at all.

He turned to ask Rayclaw what he was talking about, but the orange tabby was gone.

"We need to talk to the other Clans about it," Eveningstar was meowing thoughtfully, bringing Hailstorm's focus back to his Clanmates.

Sunfur nodded. "We could also do something at the Gathering..."

"But that's a half-moon away!" Sagetail sputtered.

Rustypelt nodded. "If the Gathering were sooner, that'd be the best plan. But it's just not soon enough."

Goldheart blinked. "Well, medicine cats are granted permission to cross borders if they need to speak with other medicine cats."

"Yeah," Yellowflower nodded. "We could ask to see Lilyfoot and Fernpaw—"

"I'm not so sure that's a great idea," Sparktail murmured.

Sunfur nodded. "Even if DayClan lets you speak to their medicine cats, which I highly doubt since Rainstar forbade them to go to the Moonfall, they would probably make you talk away from the camp so you couldn't get near the kits."

"Or they'd supervise you," Eaglefeather growled.

Yellowflower blinked. "I guess not."

"I think our best bet is to speak with the other Clans," Twilightfoot meowed, looking at Eveningstar. "They might be able to help us, especially since NightClan has had kits stolen, and DuskClan might have missing kits too."

"We can send patrols over to NightClan's and DuskClan's camps tomorrow," Eveningstar announced, voice raised.

Every cat nodded in approval at the idea.

Eveningstar blinked, then narrowed his eyes. "In the meantime, we just have to hope that Rainstar isn't going to harm the kits."

Chapter 11

Whispersong stared open-mouthed at Stoneteller. Star's destiny lies with us? But how?

"W-What do you mean?" Star stammered.

Stoneteller blinked. "You had dreams about *them*, Star." He nodded toward Echoheart and Whispersong. "And you've had dreams beyond what any Tribe cat has ever imagined."

"But... but I..." Star fumbled for words. "You... *you* had dreams about them coming!"

Stoneteller smiled weakly. "That's because it affects the Tribe. Your dreams have no effect whatsoever on your Tribemates. It had to do with *their* Tribemates." He nodded at Echoheart and Whispersong again.

Whispersong finally found her voice. "But w-why?" she stammered.

"I don't know," Stoneteller sighed.

Whispersong stared silently at Star. *This little mountain cat belongs with us? There has to be some mistake...*

Star took a deep breath. "Stoneteller?"

Stoneteller turned.

"Um, in mine, Echoheart's, and Whispersong's dreams, well, we saw a creature. I felt like I recognized it from somewhere... but, in the dream, it was hiding in the shadows, so it was hard to see. Echoheart and Whispersong have never seen it, but I feel like it lives here, in... in the mountains."

Stoneteller looked intrigued.

"It was going to kill cats, cats that I now know as *their* Tribemates,"

Star looked at Echoheart and Whispersong with fear, and Echoheart was reminded again of how young she was.

Stoneteller looked between all three of them. "What did this creature look like?"

Echoheart finally spoke up. "In mine and Whispersong's dream, it was huge and black... but it may have just been the shadows turning it black."

"It had claws longer than any badger's or eagle's," Echoheart added, shuddering.

"And it's teeth were larger than any cougar we've seen here," Star murmured with a shudder. "All I saw was the teeth and claws!"

"Larger than a cougar?" Stoneteller demanded, eyes wide.

"What's a cougar?" Whispersong asked. The only time she'd heard the word cougar was in the DayClan cat, Cougarfang's name."

"A mountain lion is its other name," Star shivered. "You've heard of lions?"

"Yes," Whispersong meowed. "Manes like the rays of the sun, and golden pelts that—"

"Well cougars do not have golden pelts, they're dirt-brown. And their manes are gone. They're evil."

Whispersong blinked. She could picture the cougar in her head, huge and merciless; a lion so evil it didn't have a mane, like the ones she'd heard stories about from her parents and the elders. She shuddered. And the Tribe cats had met them before!

Echoheart shuddered. "At least the danger isn't a cougar."

"The animal in the dream seemed worse," Star murmured.

"Worse?" Whispersong exclaimed in fright. "Worse than a cougar? Worse than an evil, merciless mountain lion?"

"Well, from what I saw of its teeth and claws. I couldn't see much else of its body or face, so I don't even know what color its fur was," Star murmured.

Whispersong shrugged. "We don't know exactly what color it was either. It seemed black, but that may have just been the darkness and the shadows."

Stoneteller narrowed his eyes, then he nodded. "Well, tomorrow Star can take you around the territory and show you all the animals that live up here. Maybe you can figure out what it is."

"Why can't you go with us?" Whispersong asked.

"Tribe Healers don't leave the cave except for ceremonies," Stoneteller replied.

"Why not?" Echoheart asked.

"To protect the Tribe. If something were to happen to me while out hunting, my cats would be in complete chaos in deciding a new Healer."

Echoheart nodded.

Whispersong didn't. Her mind had suddenly drifted. They were so close to discovering what the danger was. But, now that Star said the creature seemed worse than a cougar, which seemed about the worst it could get, Echoheart wasn't sure she even wanted to know what the danger was anymore.

Stoneteller got to his paws and turned to Star, Echoheart, and Whispersong. Echoheart pushed her thoughts away as the brown tom meowed, "We can finish this discussion whenever you find out information on your dreams or the creature."

Then he turned and left his den, with Star right behind him.

Whispersong glanced at Echoheart, then they too headed to the main cave, where all the Tribe cats were sitting in groups, sharing meals. She saw Seed, a cream tabby queen, and her kit, Dust. To their left was Moss with her two kits, Night and Howl. The two

mountain she-cats were talking and nodding, while the three young kits chased each other around their mothers.

Bumblefrost had returned from his hunting patrol and was sitting with Moth and Screech. Whispersong was about to join the DayClan cat when Star called, "Whispersong, Echoheart! Come sit with us!"

Whispersong shot Bumblefrost an apologetic glance, then followed Star across the cave with Echoheart, who was sitting with four young cats, whom Whispersong assumed were the other to-bes.

"Echoheart, Whispersong," Star meowed. "This is Crevice of Deep Cave. He's training to be a prey-hunter." She nodded at a dark gray tom with green eyes. "This is Dawn of New Day, a cave-guard to-be." A ginger and white she-cat with green eyes blinked at them warily. "Right here," Star motioned to white- and black-patched she-cat, "is Feather of Bird in Flight, a cave- guard-in-training. And lastly," Star smiled at a black tom with yellow eyes, "is Owl of Dark Night, a cave-guard to-be as well."

"You're those forest cats with weird names, aren't you?" Dawn asked.

"The foreigners who apparently need *our* help," added Crevice, with a hint of a sneer in his husky mountain voice.

Whispersong blinked but said nothing.

"Well, Echoheart, Whispersong," meowed Star suddenly, sensing the tension, "I'll show you two to the prey."

Echoheart glanced at Whispersong, then they followed Star across the cave.

"Sorry about them," Star sighed.

"It's alright," Echoheart meowed, staring at the fresh-kill pile.

Star blinked. "Here's the prey pile," she murmured, then she backed away toward her friends, leaving the two sisters alone.

"Do you want to sit with us?"

Whispersong turned and saw Flower and Rain.

"Sure," Whispersong purred at the prey-hunters. She grabbed a hare for herself and Echoheart, then followed Flower and Rain, who had a kestrel to share.

As she ate, she found her mind wandering to what Stoneteller had said about Star's destiny earlier. How could it lie with the Clans?

Whispersong sighed. All she knew was that every day they stayed inside the cave or hunted with the Tribe cats, that was a day they could have used to try and find out about the danger. And now, especially since she and Echoheart had been gone for nearly two moons, every day counted.

* * *

Whispersong yawned. She, Echoheart, and Star had already left for the day, and Star would be showing them all the creatures that lived up here in the mountainous territory.

"So, any ideas as to what animal could be the danger?" Whispersong asked.

Star blinked. "I have a few..." she trailed off with a shiver. "We'll go down to the tree line; that's where you'll find most of the other bigger creatures.

"I was thinking," Echoheart meowed suddenly. "What if it's wolves?"

Star fell silent. "No, I don't think so. Wolves live and hunt in packs, and the creature in our dreams was clearly alone, and powerful enough by itself."

"Badgers?" Whispersong asked, though she knew it was unlikely.

Star opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by Echoheart.

"What's that?" Echoheart exclaimed.

"What's what? A badger?" Star asked. "I thought you said you had badgers at—"

"No, that!"

Whispersong looked. A huge animal stood hidden in the trees, its dark brown pelt blending in with the distant spruce tree line. It had twig-like branches sprouting from its head, much like the deer they often saw up here, but more threatening.

"That's a moose," Star whispered. "Follow me." They crept around a boulder and hid behind it. "They can be vicious. One of our prey-hunters was killed by a moose last season," Star murmured.

"Could *that* the danger?" Echoheart exclaimed.

"No," Star shook her head. "The danger had fangs and claws; moose don't. But don't get me wrong: those antlers on its head can be just as effective as fangs and claws. Don't mess with them."

Whispersong shuddered.

"Let's go," Star whispered, leading the way around the boulders. They carefully avoided the moose, keeping to the stone and not to the grass where the moose was. Star lead them down the steady slope in silence, and a long time passed before they saw another creature. Hawks and eagles flew above, taking no notice of the three cats walking below them.

"There's some wolves," Star suddenly murmured.

Echoheart followed the silver she-cat's gaze to a pack of wolves crouched over and eating a dead hare.

"Let's hope they're not still hungry," Whispersong breathed.

"I bet not," Star meowed calmly. "Plus, we're downwind; they won't be able to smell us."

Whispersong nodded, feeling the wind hitting her face as it blew from the wolves to her. They smelled an awful lot like Twolegs' dogs, but without the Twoleg scent.

Just then a low growl filled the air, not from the wolves, but from the trees. The wolves looked up, hackles lifted. The grass rustled

violently, and something stepped into the clearing.

Whispersong froze and let out a gasp.

It was huge, nearly as big as the moose, with a head larger than the boulder she was hidden behind. Its thick, sleek, black fur rippled as it walked, huge muscles flexing with each step. It snarled, and the wolves fled. The creature opened its jaws and ripped the rabbit that wolves had been eating in half, bones crunching. It held its meal to the ground with unbelievably large claws, nearly as long as a kit's tail. Its beady eyes found the three cats' gazes, black and glinting with evil.

Recognition hit Whispersong like a blow to the chest. The danger from StarClan's vision was standing right in front of her. Her nightmare had come to life.

"Run!" Star screeched.

Chapter 12

Hailstorm paced the clearing anxiously. The green-leaf sun blazed high in the cloudless blue sky, making him pant under its increasing heat.

Earlier this morning, Eveningstar had taken Rustypelt, Sparrowtail, and Meadowheart to DuskClan's camp, and Sunfur had taken Gravelpelt, Eaglefeather, and Sparktail to NightClan's camp, to discuss DayClan and the stolen kits.

Personally, Hailstorm didn't know what good it did, just talking. What could they do by talking? So what? DayClan still had the kits. Hailstorm grunted angrily. It'd been three sunrises since Cherrykit and Lilackit had been kidnapped. Were they even getting any food? Any water?

Hailstorm stopped pacing and let out a ragged breath.

They must be scared to death.

Hailstorm lashed his tail furiously. Exactly how many kits had DayClan stolen from the other Clans? And what did Rainstar plan on doing with them? Hailstorm cursed under his breath, resuming his pacing of the camp.

He was vaguely aware of Yellowflower watching him by her den, looking sympathetic. Hailstorm narrowed his eyes and snorted. Why was she feeling sympathetic for *him* ? She should be sympathetic for Sagetail and Bronzepelt, whose kits had been stolen! Or even sympathetic for Rayclaw, who had felt very guilty about not noticing the DayClan scent during his vigil. But Rayclaw didn't seem as worried as his parents anymore, which Hailstorm found quite odd. He'd said something yesterday about knowing what he had to do. What had Rayclaw meant when he'd said that? Surely if any cat knew what to do it would be the leader or the medicine cats; not a young, inexperienced warrior!

Hailstorm paced faster.

But Eveningstar, Goldheart, and Yellowflower hadn't known what to do; they hadn't received any signs from StarClan. Nothing! And even if one of them had, they hadn't mentioned it to the Clan.

Well, Hailstorm thought, *Goldheart and Yellowflower did try and ask DayClan's medicine cats about the kits*. But it had been pointless anyway, since Lilyfoot and Fernpaw hadn't been at the last trip to the Moonfall.

Hailstorm let out a long sigh. He shook his head in anger at DayClan, and his claws tore at the grass and dirt beneath his paws.

Suddenly he caught a whiff of cat-scent on the air. Hailstorm jerked his head up. He sniffed the air again. The patrols that had gone to talk to NightClan and DuskClan were coming back! *Already?* Hailstorm thought in confusion. They'd only left this morning! How could they already be back? He jogged walked toward the bramble entrance in curiosity and confusion as the two patrols stormed into the camp with tails lashing, fur on edge, and flanks heaving in what appeared to be anger, not exhaustion. Hailstorm blinked in worry.

"What happened?" Goldheart asked worriedly, jogging forward from the group of cats huddled around the patrols.

Eveningstar was breathing heavily. "We didn't get into NightClan *or* DuskClan territory."

"Why not?" Sagetail asked, a worried edge to her voice.

"DayClan," Rustypelt growled.

Every cat in the clearing let out a gasp.

"*DayClan* ?" Aspenleaf echoed in disbelief.

Sunfur nodded next to Eveningstar, tail flicking angrily. "We met a DayClan patrol on the border: Bristlepine, Clayfur, and Hawktuft."

At once, the clearing was filled with angry outbursts.

Eveningstar raised his tail for silence, but looked just as angry as the rest of the Clan.

Gravelpelt spoke up next to the DawnClan leader. "They told us that Rainstar had a message to give to us."

"A *message* ?" Twilightfoot asked, eyes narrowed in disbelief.

Eveningstar nodded, brown eyes burning. "They told us they would give us our kits back *only* if we surrendered our territory."

The clearing fell into a shocked silence. After several heartbeats and many horrified and furious looks, Hailstorm sputtered, "They *what* ?"

"They can't do that!" Spruceclaw exclaimed, tail lashing.

Goldheart let out a hiss, and Yellowflower snarled, "Have they forgotten the will of StarClan?"

Sparktail stepped forward. "I don't think Rainstar cares what StarClan thinks anymore."

"What did you say to the DayClan patrol?" Aspenleaf asked quietly, as if talking too loud would bring the DayClan cats right to the camp.

"We told them we'd never surrender our territory to them, and that they'd give us back our kits now, or pay," Eveningstar spoke up to the angry crowd.

Sunfur shuddered. "They... they just laughed."

Rustypelt nodded. "They told us they'd already been to DuskClan with Rainstar's message, and they said that Orangestar had refused as well. There was something about Bristlepine's voice that suggested that if we refused to give up our territory like DuskClan supposedly had... something bad would ha—" She broke off, shivering.

Hailstorm shared a worried glance with Clovertail. What *would* DayClan do when DawnClan refused to surrender to them?

Sagetail wailed. "What are we going to do?"

"Well, we can't surrender!" yowled Moonshine.

"What we do we do then?" Bronzepelt spat. "*Nothing* ? And risk my kits' safety?"

"Well, when we told them no, they said they'd give us one day to reconsider. They said to meet us at the border tomorrow at sunhigh to give our answer," Sparktail murmured with a shudder. "If we don't surrender, they said we'd suffer the consequences."

"What consequences?" Creekfall snorted. "It's not like they can attack us! It'd be like the last battle; the other three Clans all against DayClan! They'd be outnumbered and we'd win!"

"We won, yes, but we lost Twigfoot, and NightClan lost many cats too. How many more lives would we lose if DayClan attacked us again?" Sunfur murmured.

That silenced the clearing. Hailstorm felt a stab of pain in his heart at the mention of his dead father.

"Never underestimate DayClan," Meadowheart muttered darkly.

"So what *should* we do?" Clovertail asked.

"We won't actually meet them at the border tomorrow right?" Eaglefeather asked.

"We *have* to," Eveningstar meowed, claws tearing at the grass. "And we'll tell then that we have no intention of surrendering."

"No!" Sagetail cried out. "No! What about my kits! My k—"

"Sagetail, it's alright. It'll be alright," Sparktail soothed.

"But—"

"They've asked for the same thing from DuskClan and NightClan," Rustypelt meowed. "And if both other Clans refuse to give in, they are outnumbered. They can't demand territory from all of us if we

all refuse."

"But they've *got* to have a backup plan," Copperleaf added quietly. "Rainstar's always had one for every plan she's ever had."

Sunfur nodded at Copperleaf, looking worried. "We'll just have to see tomorrow."

Slowly the gathered cats broke apart, muttering as they left.

Hailstorm didn't move. He'd had a sudden idea. He needed to find Rayclaw. The young warrior had said to himself yesterday that he knew what to do. Why hadn't he spoken up during this meeting? Hailstorm blinked. Come to think of it, he hadn't even *seen* Rayclaw at the meeting. Hailstorm looked around the clearing in confusion. He hadn't seen Rayclaw all day.

Hailstorm looked around and spotted Sagetail sitting gloomily by the nursery, and he jogged over to her. "Sagetail?" he called. The cream-furred she-cat turned her head wearily. "Have you seen Rayclaw lately?"

Sagetail's eyes filled with more concern, if possible. "No." Her voice faltered as she looked around the camp for her oldest kit.

"He's probably gone hunting," Hailstorm meowed quickly. Though he doubted it, he was trying to spare Sagetail any worry. She didn't need to think that she'd lost *all* of her kits to DayClan.

He decided not to ask any other cat if they'd seen Rayclaw, in case it sparked worry. Hailstorm shook his head. He *knew* Rayclaw was somewhere near here; he just had a feeling. Hailstorm left toward the camp entrance at a run, then he walked aimlessly through the forest, mind wandering.

Why did DayClan seem so sure that their plan would work? All three of the other Clans were refusing their demands to surrender!

Those fox-hearts! How dare they threaten us with our own *kits!* Hailstorm let out a huff and stomped faster, barely aware that he had just crossed the log-bridge over the stream. He stared at his paws, flinging dirt and old leaves aside as he made his way angrily

through the forest. His fury at Rainstar was slowly pushing his search for Rayclaw out of his mind.

She has some real nerve, Hailstorm thought, flattening his ears bitterly. *Taking our kits like that and trying to use them to get more territory.*

That's what Twigfoot had warned him about! What had he said? *'The kits are safe, but for now. Rainstar is using them against you. You have to be ready.'*

Rainstar was using the kits to try to get more territory!

But what did Twigfoot mean when he said to be ready? Ready for what? Hailstorm thought. *An attack? DayClan wouldn't dare...*

But maybe they would.

Twigfoot's next words rang in Hailstorm's mind: 'StarClan has told another cat. Trust StarClan. Trust your Clanmates'. Which cat had StarClan told? Goldheart? Yellowflower? Eveningstar?But all three of them had seemed shocked about Rainstar's plan of stealing the other Clans' kits. Hailstorm sighed. Perhaps StarClan had been mistaken. Maybe they hadn't told another cat.

"Woah!"

Hailstorm's head hit something hard. He fell over, dizzy, then he blinked and looked up.

Rayclaw was standing over him, with Stormpaw at his side.

Wait, what? Hailstorm blinked again and shook his head. Stormpaw? No, it *couldn't* be a DayClan cat on *his* territory.

He closed his eyes and shook the throbbing from his head.

"You, uh... Are you alright, Hailstorm?"

Hailstorm opened his eyes and saw an extremely concerned Rayclaw standing over him, with Stormpaw right behind him.

Rayclaw blinked. "You hit your head pretty hard on my shoulder."

Hailstorm barely heard him. Stormpaw was *really* standing there, with Rayclaw, on *DawnClan* territory. Hailstorm felt fury growing inside him. What, in the name of *every* single star in the sky, was Rayclaw doing with the *enemy* on DawnClan territory? Hailstorm flattened his ears. Stormpaw was using Rayclaw; that had to be it! And she was probably doing it on her mother's orders! Rainstar was trying to get information! They were trying to spy! Rayclaw was being tricked!

Hailstorm leapt to his paws and bowled Stormpaw over. He forced her onto her back. "You fox-heart!" He shoved her head to the dirt, ignoring Rayclaw's yells of protest. He growled between breaths, "You... are... using him... and you... will ...pay! You will not... spy... on... DawnClan! I won't... let you!"

Suddenly he was on the ground. "Stop it, Hailstorm!" It was Rayclaw.

Hailstorm stared up at the orange warrior, dumbfounded. Surely Rayclaw realized that Stormpaw had tricked him? How could he believe anything she said, especially since her *mother* had stolen Rayclaw's younger sisters?

Rayclaw walked over to Stormpaw and nudged her up. Hailstorm was horrified. His anger surged stronger. He tried to get to his paws, but Rayclaw growled, "Leave her be, Hailstorm."

Hailstorm gaped at him. "What...? Are you... *insane* ?"

"She's on our side, alright?"

Hailstorm closed his eyes and shook his head. No. This wasn't real. Rayclaw couldn't be *that* dumb! This had to be his imagination. It *had* to be...

"Hailstorm," Rayclaw growled impatiently.

Hailstorm's eyes flew back open in an angry rush. "Alright! Then what's... what's *she* doing here?" Hailstorm forced the words out in a growl.

Rayclaw sighed. "It's a long story. But I'm taking her to Eveningstar first."

"To the camp? Into *our camp* ? How do you know she's not using you and trying to spy?" Hailstorm sputtered angrily. "We *can't* trust her!"

Stormpaw narrowed her green eyes but didn't speak. She looked unbelievably small next to the large-footed, broad-shouldered, full-grown Rayclaw.

"Please, Hailstorm," Rayclaw meowed. "We *have* to trust her."

"Why?" Hailstorm hissed, tail flicking in suspicion. He didn't trust her in the least; and he never would!

"I'm taking her to Eveningstar," Rayclaw repeated with force, standing in front of the small black- and white-patched DayClan apprentice as if to shield her.

Hailstorm growled. But then he thought it over. If any cat in DawnClan could make Rayclaw see that they could not possibly trust Stormpaw, it would be Eveningstar. *He'd* know she wasn't trustworthy.

Hailstorm looked at Rayclaw through narrowed eyes and nodded curtly. "Fine."

Rayclaw swept past Hailstorm without another word, Stormpaw scurrying closely after him. With a feeling of foreboding, Hailstorm followed them.

He watched Stormpaw glancing around at the trees, looking curious but apprehensive. Hailstorm hissed. She had *no* right to know what DawnClan's territory looked like; *no* right to take it all in so she could go blabbing to her mother later!

Stormpaw crossed the stream easily, Rayclaw close behind. While Hailstorm was crossing the stream on the log-bridge, his outstretched claw caught in the moist bark. With a hiss of frustration, he pulled it free and stomped after Rayclaw, in an even worse mood.

The brambles lining the camp soon came into view, and Hailstorm felt grim satisfaction swelling in his chest. *He* wouldn't be the only one angry at Rayclaw for bringing a DayClan cat into the camp, and *Rainstar's* daughter for that matter! They'd agree with Hailstorm. No DayClan cat should be allowed into the DawnClan camp, especially during these times!

Stormpaw seemed to be thinking the same thing; she slunk behind Rayclaw with her tail low, and her fear-scent filled the air.

Sunfur was sitting nearest to the camp entrance, and when she saw Stormpaw behind Rayclaw, she jumped to her feet unbelievably fast and let out an irate hiss.

Hailstorm sniffed in satisfaction, glancing at Rayclaw with nose raised in the air. *See? I was right! No one wants to bring a DayClan cat to our camp! No cat in their right* mind *would!*

Sunfur finally found her words, and spit began flying as she hissed, "What's *she* doing here? Rayclaw! Hailstorm! Explain yourselves!" Her whole body shook with fury.

"I had nothing to do with this!" Hailstorm growled angrily. "I don't want her here! I tried to stop them!"

By now the whole Clan had gathered by the camp entrance.

"Maybe Rayclaw captured her as a prisoner!" Pinekit piped up, Needlekit and Rosekit nodding beside him eagerly.

"I told you to stay in the nursery!" Aspenleaf growled. The three kits scowled, then stomped away toward the nursery again.

"*Did* you capture her as a prisoner?" Creekfall asked.

"No," Rayclaw answered flatly.

"Then why, in the name of StarClan, did you bring her here?" Bronzepelt growled, glaring at his son in disapproval.

Rayclaw faced his Clanmates indignantly. "She may be our only hope against DayClan."

There was complete silence. Such a silence that Hailstorm could hear his own heart beating, and every other cats' hearts around him. It stayed this way for a while, and every cat just stared at Rayclaw and Stormpaw, who stared back apprehensively.

Finally the silence was broken. "I'm taking her to talk to Eveningstar," Rayclaw meowed, with such finality that every cat gawked at him in disbelief.

"Eveningstar is on patrol with Gravelpelt and Sparrowtail," Sunfur told him matter-of-factly, a snarl in her voice.

"Then we'll talk to him when he gets back."

"You brought her to our camp?" Meadowheart asked with a growl, "to see Eveningstar? You let her *see our camp* just because she wants to talk to Eveningstar?"

"She doesn't want to see Eveningstar. I want her to."

"Even worse!" Sagetail sounded close to hysteria, looking both scared and angry at what her son had done.

Stormpaw, who hadn't moved a mouse-length since arriving here, was staring wide- eyed at the DawnClan cats around her. Her pelt was bristled, and her ears were flattened.

She's just faking her fear, Hailstorm thought bitterly, narrowing his blue eyes to slits.

"Get her out of the camp, Rayclaw," Sunfur ordered with a growl.

"She *will* speak with Eveningstar," Rayclaw hissed, shielding Stormpaw from Sunfur.

"Not if I say she won't," Sunfur spat, fur bristling furiously along her spine.

Hailstorm spoke to Rayclaw for the first time since back at camp. "Why does she have to speak with Eveningstar so badly? What good will any cat get from it! We can't trust her! When you turn your back on her, she'll run home to her mother to tell her all she's seen

and heard about us!" he sneered, glaring at Rayclaw. "And you *trust* her?"

Rayclaw squared his shoulders and raised his chin defiantly. "Yes, I do."

A shocked gasp echoed around the camp, but Rayclaw didn't flinch.

Sunfur couldn't take it anymore, and she spat, "Take her away, now! Out of my sight. Rayclaw, I'm disappointed in you. Disappointed beyond words." She was shaking. "Take her back to the border; you are forbidden to go to any more Gatherings, and you will be confined to camp. Take her *now*."

Rayclaw didn't move. He was shaking too. Hurt and fury burned in his orange eyes.

"Listen to your deputy, Rayclaw," Bronzepelt growling warningly, glaring at his son.

Rayclaw still didn't move. "She *will* see Eveningstar. And I *will not* be taking her back to DayClan."

Sunfur snarled, then lunged at Rayclaw and pushed him over. Even though this was against the warrior code, no cat in the camp seemed shocked at Sunfur's action. Every cat was glaring at Rayclaw; unable to believe he'd refused an order from the deputy.

"I'll take her myself then," Sunfur spat, shoving Rayclaw aside. She turned angrily to the rest of the Clan. "Keep Rayclaw here. He has dug himself into a hole he can't get out of." Sunfur turned to a trembling Stormpaw. "Get up!"

Just then Eveningstar raced into the camp, looking shocked. Sparrowtail and Gravelpelt had dropped the prey they were carrying as they stared in horror at the scene before them. "What is going on?" Eveningstar demanded angrily.

Sunfur straightened herself up. "Rayclaw has deliberately brought a DayClan cat to our camp. I ordered him to take her back at once, but he refused."

Eveningstar turned to Rayclaw. "Is this true?" He looked extremely shocked.

Rayclaw nodded stiffly. "Yes, Eveningstar, but I need to speak to you, and Stormpaw does too. I promise she doesn't want to spy on us. We just need to talk to you."

Eveningstar stared at Sunfur. "And you denied Rayclaw this?"

Sunfur looked uncomfortable. Now that Eveningstar put it this way, Hailstorm realized that it sounded very different than the way Sunfur had taken it. But when Sunfur replied to her leader, she spoke confidently. "She could be using us to try and get information on DawnClan. She is Rainstar's kit after all."

Eveningstar let out a sigh. "I know; we can only be suspicious and furious if we see a DayClan cat in our camp at these times. But if Rayclaw wants her to speak to me, I will not deny her that, especially seeing Rayclaw's trust in her. I trust Rayclaw, and I trust his judgement."

"But bringing her here is breaking the w—"

"I'll see what she has to say, then I'll decide what to do with her," Eveningstar meowed, and Stormpaw shivered, eyes widened in fear as Eveningstar spoke about her like that. "Rayclaw, to my den." And Eveningstar leapt up the High-stone without another word. Rayclaw followed, looking relieved, and Stormpaw was close behind, looking scared.

No cat spoke for several heartbeats. Hailstorm watched Sunfur shake her head, still looking upset, then walk over to the warriors' den, with Bronzepelt and Sagetail behind her. Sparrowtail and Gravelpelt exchanged glances, then picked up their dropped prey and carried it to the fresh-kill pile.

Hailstorm looked up at the sun, blazing down intensely on them. But now it was past sunhigh, and the shade of the trees was starting to cover the camp.

Hailstorm busied himself by getting the elders fresh bedding; there

were no apprentices at the moment, so the apprentice duties were shared by the younger warriors. Clovertail offered to help, and Hailstorm was glad of her company.

"Do you trust Rayclaw in trusting Stormpaw?" Hailstorm asked his sister as they passed the Great Pine.

Clovertail blinked in thought. "I trust Rayclaw," she answered simply.

"Yes," Hailstorm meowed impatiently. "I normally do too, but, it's just... he's..."

"Trusting a DayClan cat," Clovertail finished for him.

Hailstorm nodded. "Yes. Rayclaw broke the warrior code by bringing her to the camp without the leader's or deputy's permission, and he directly disobeyed the deputy."

Clovertail sighed. "I know. But Rayclaw seems to know something we don't know. He would normally be the last cat to bring a DayClan cat into our camp, so he obviously truly believes he is doing the right thing by bringing her here." Clovertail paused. "Plus, Stormpaw didn't look like she wanted to spy or anything; she looked quite scared, you know, for being who she is, which makes me believe Rayclaw even more."

"Yes, but..." Hailstorm muttered.

"We'll just have to see what Eveningstar thinks," Clovertail meowed, shrugging. "He's got good judgement."

Hailstorm nodded and sighed.

They had reached the stream. Large bushes grew around it, and the grasses were tall. Hailstorm headed toward the log-bridge, where the bank was filled with stone rather than mud and plants, which were dark with mist as the stream flowed past. The two warriors paralleled the stream's edge, following it upstream in search for a large patch of moss.

"There's some," Clovertail exclaimed.

Hailstorm followed her gaze. Up ahead was a large section of stone on the bank, whose whole surface was bright green with fresh moss.

Hailstorm meowed, "Great find," then followed Clovertail to the moss patch. They didn't talk as they stripped the stone of the moss, making two piles

"That's good I think," Hailstorm spoke up, looking at the gray stone where the moss used to be. "We'll want to leave some here so it can keep growing for later."

Clovertail nodded, beginning to gather up her pile of moss. Hailstorm grabbed the rest in his jaws and followed his sister through the forest back to the camp. By the time they returned, the forest had turned auburn in the sunset. Hailstorm entered through the bramble barrier and he found that the whole Clan was gathered around the base of the High-stone. Eveningstar stood on the top of the large boulder with Rayclaw and Stormpaw further behind him.

"...Rayclaw and Stormpaw have shared some important information with me, and now they are ready to share it with you," Eveningstar was meowing. But Stormpaw looked anything *but* ready to share something to the DawnClan cats. Her green eyes widened as Rayclaw urged her forward.

"Let's drop this off real fast at the elders' den," Clovertail murmured through a mouthful of the moss. Hailstorm nodded and followed his sister, straining to hear what Eveningstar was saying.

"...ask you to please hear them out and not interrupt. Stormpaw has sacrif..."

Eveningstar's voice trailed off as Hailstorm and Clovertail walked towards the back of the camp and into the elders' den. They dropped the new moss on the floor of the den, gathered up the old moss and moved it behind the bushes.

When they were done, Hailstorm immediately ran across the camp and joined the meeting, finding a spot beside Aspenleaf.

Hailstorm looked up; Stormpaw was, rather nervously and quietly,

speaking now.

"...never quite agreed with what my mother did. And... on my first Gathering, I-I knew that I was being judged by who my parents were and not, uh, not by who... *I* am." Stormpaw paused, and her eyes met Hailstorm's. She quickly looked away. "Rayclaw, well Ray*paw* then, was the only cat who sympathized with me. Of course, at first I didn't fully trust him, and then," she let out a long exhale, "he warmed up to me. And I warmed up to him. He, um, well," she cast a nervous glance at Eveningstar.

"Go on; they will not judge you or Rayclaw," Eveningstar spoke up, giving the Clan a stern stare.

Stormpaw took a deep breath. "Rayclaw... met me on the border while I was on a walk," she continued, with slight more confidence than before. "He knew something was wrong. But I didn't want to tell him what my mother's plan was going to be, mostly out of loyalty to my Clan and to my mother, but also out of fear of what would happen if I betrayed them both."

Hailstorm flicked his ears, finding himself leaning closer in anticipation to hear what Stormpaw was saying.

"I told Rayclaw that I just wasn't sure how to feel about my mother at the time. That I, uh, didn't like how she was handling things. He understood, and told me that he wouldn't want to be judged by what Rainstar did either." Stormpaw glanced behind her at Rayclaw, and, after a pause, she murmured, "We met night after night..."

Hailstorm blinked and flicked his ears. So *that's* where Rayclaw had snuck off to that night during the rain storm: to meet Stormpaw.

"...and yesterday," Stormpaw continued, "Rainstar told me she wanted to go on a walk with me, so I followed her out of camp. She told me that she's noticed that I... uh, was leaving the camp at night. I... I said that I didn't know what she meant." Stormpaw shuddered. "She... she said, 'Don't lie to me. Where have you been?' Bef-fore I could even answer, she started growling at me; she was furious. 'Don't act like I'm stupid, Stormpaw,' she told me, 'You've

never supported my plans like Emberpaw and Flamepaw do. You've never wanted to make our Clan stronger like the rest of your Clanmates do!' I... I told her that not *every* cat agreed, and she hissed at me."

The whole of DawnClan seemed to be holding its breath.

"I told her that she was evil, killing k-kits..." there was a loud gasp among the DawnClan cats. "Yes, my mother killed two of the stolen kits," Stormpaw nodded in disgust at the looks of absolute shock on every cat's face. Bronzepelt swayed on his paws, and Sagetail let out what was like strangled squeal, like she was suddenly being choked.

Hailstorm felt his mouth go dry at the DayClan apprentice's words. *It couldn't be Lilackit and Cherrykit?* Hailstorm felt dizzy and distant; the same sensation he'd experienced after Twigfoot's death. Hailstorm's ears didn't seem to be working anymore; he only registered fragments of Stormpaw's words.

"...was after... then said... pay... Darkkit... Redkit... left by border..."

Hailstorm slowly came back into focus. He heard Bronzepelt, though faintly, choke out, "So... so the DawnClan kits are... s-safe?"

Stormpaw nodded grimly, with what looked like a mix of hatred and fear. "For now."

Sparktail blinked with a shudder. "So, Darkkit, that... newborn NightClan kit... is... dead?"

Stormpaw nodded and closed her eyes.

"And Redkit? Who's Redkit?"

"Redkit, Scarletkit, and Amberkit," Stormpaw meowed sadly, "are Gingerfur and Orangestar's new kits."

"And... and Rainstar *killed* one of them?" Sagetail managed to ask.

Stormpaw nodded faintly, black- and white-patched pelt bristling. "After DuskClan refused to give up their territory... my Clanmates told them that they would pay. Then... then Rainstar dragged

Redkit, ch-choosing him randomly ou-out of the three DuskClan kits, from the d-den." Stormpaw sounded as if she was in painful tears. "Every cat watched, and... and I ran as I r-realized what she was d-d-doing..." Stormpaw broke off with a shudder.

Hailstorm felt his mouth go drier. The same thing had happened to Darkkit from NightClan. He clawed at the grass, tearing up the roots. He hated every hair, every whisker, *everything* about Rainstar! He wanted to kill her, take all her lives away slowly until she was truly dead, gone to StarClan.

No. Rainstar didn't belong in StarClan. She belonged in the Place of No Stars; the Dark Forest. She deserved to go to that evil place where sinful cats went after death. Hailstorm shuddered. Yes. She'd die and go there. He wanted her to suffer what she made other cats suffer. He wanted to torture her. He wanted her in so much pain that she'd be begging for death.

Hailstorm could tell that he wasn't the only one. Sunfur, Rustypelt, and Gravelpelt were on edge, hissing. Sparktail and Moonshine were lashing their tails. Sagetail was sobbing into Bronzepelt's shoulder. Aspenleaf was shaking with fury beside Sparrowtail, who was tearing at the grass with her claws.

"She... she threw the dead b-bodies across the borders the next day," Stormpaw whimpered, "f-for their c-Clans to find." She wobbled. "After that, I... I couldn't t-take it anymore. I r-ran away, across the river a-and into D-DawnClan territory, and I... I found Rayclaw. I never w-want to go back again!" Stormpaw's legs gave way and she collapsed, shaking.

Rayclaw raced forward and murmured something to Stormpaw, who didn't move.

Eveningstar stepped forward angrily. "Don't you see?" he hollered to the shocked Clan. "Our kits are in danger! You need to find trust in Stormpaw's words, or face losing our kits to Rainstar!"

Every cat exchanged glances.

Sunfur stepped forward, looking shocked. "Stormpaw," the deputy

meowed sadly. "I-I'm sorry I threatened you. And Rayclaw, I'm sorry I ever doubted your judgement; you have good reason for everything you do, and I respect that."

Rayclaw dipped his head. "I knew you'd need some convincing before you believed me."

Sagetail spoke up, finding her confidence. "So what are we going to do?"

Eveningstar yowled, "We have to meet DayClan tomorrow at the border."

"And do what?" Meadowheart sounded scared. "If we give in, well, we are under Rainstar's control!"

"But if we refuse to give in, they'll kill my kits!" Sagetail wailed with a hiss.

Stormpaw straightened herself up. She sniffled, then meowed, "You need to unite with the other Clans against Rainstar to get your kits back."

Hailstorm blinked. It was weird to hear *Stormpaw*, the daughter of Rainstar, tell them that they needed to unite against DayClan. Apparently every other cat thought the same thing, because they stared at one another in amazement.

"You... you mean *attack* DayClan's camp?" Moonshine stammered.

"What? Are you mouse-brained?" Twilightfoot exclaimed.

Stormpaw nodded. "It's... it's the only way," she sighed. "Like you said; if you-u refuse, your kits will die; if-f you give in, you're under R-Rainstar's control. Bu-But no matter what happens, she'll s-still figure out more plans until she cont-trols the whole forest. I know my mother; that's w-what she'll do for her revenge. Unless you attack th-the camp, she won't stop-p."

Hailstorm glanced at his Clanmates.

"Her *revenge* ? On what? What did we do to her that she has to kill

our kits?" Eaglefeather sputtered.

No cat seemed to hear him; everyone was still staring at Stormpaw, who repeated, "You have to attack the camp if you want to rescue your kits and stop Rainstar. DayClan's not the same as it once was, or so I've heard from the senior cats in the Clan. Rainstar has changed it for the worse on her quest for vengeance, and if we stop her, once and for all, DayClan won't be seen as evil anymore. DayClan will be respected and trusted, and the forest will be safe."

There was a silence as every cat stared at the small DayClan apprentice in surprise.

"I couldn't have said it better," Eveningstar meowed, then he stepped forward a pace on the Highstone. "We need to figure out what we're going to do now. Stormpaw's plan seems the most logical. So, Twilightfoot, Copperleaf, Spruceclaw; up for a bit of traveling?"

The three elders nodded determinedly. "We may be elders, but that doesn't mean were useless," Spruceclaw answered.

"I need you, Twilightfoot, to take a small patrol to DuskClan, and you, Copperleaf, to take a small patrol to NightClan. Spruceclaw, go with one of their patrols. Tell them what we plan to do, that we plan to attack DayClan's camp and save all of our kits; tell them Stormpaw's story, everything. Stay the night in their camp so you can lead them to our territory tomorrow at dawn," Eveningstar ordered. "We may have been unsuccessful in trying to get to their territories this morning, but now that it's night I think it'll be easier." The three elders nodded in determination.

Then the DawnClan leader turned to Sunfur. "I need you and the rest of the senior warriors to come up with our plan with me. Stormpaw, you can come help; we need to know DayClan's territory."

Stormpaw nodded in determination, tears still glistening on her cheeks.

I can't believe we're using an apprentice's *plan for something as serious*

as this, thought Hailstorm with an inward sigh. *And a* DayClan *apprentice at that.*

Hailstorm turned to look at the elders taking patrols to the other Clans. Copperleaf and Spruceclaw were bringing Moonshine with them on their patrol to NightClan, and Twilightfoot was taking Creekfall and Eaglefeather on his patrol to DuskClan. Hailstorm sighed. It was up to those two patrols to get NightClan and DuskClan here by sunrise tomorrow to fight; if they didn't, DawnClan couldn't launch an attack.

NightClan and DuskClan both had kits stolen, and each had a kit killed. They'll definitely want to take part in trying to drive Rainstar out, won't they? he thought.

Hailstorm looked up nervously at the stars appearing in the blue-black sky, scattered as the sunlight left the forest. Hailstorm shivered. *StarClan, we're going to be needing all the guidance we can get tomorrow*, he thought with a long and ragged sigh. Tomorrow was the day that determined the fate of the surviving kits; they'd be attacking DayClan's camp tomorrow. And it had all been decided with a few words exchanged by Stormpaw and Eveningstar.

"We're relying on you to get NightClan and DuskClan here by sunrise tomorrow!" Eveningstar called after the leaving patrols. They nodded, then Hailstorm and the rest of the Clan watched them disappear into the shadows.

"Senior warriors and Stormpaw, this way," Eveningstar yowled, nodding toward his den. "The rest of you; get some sleep. We're going to need just about every set of paws we can get tomorrow, so I need you to be well-rested."

"I'll help! I'll help!" Pinekit squealed in excitement, jumping toward the senior warriors and Eveningstar.

"No," Aspenleaf meowed firmly. "You will be staying here tomorrow."

"But *Mother* !" Rosekit protested, "Eveningstar said that we need every set of paws tomorrow!"

"Did you really think he meant *us* ?" Pinekit muttered gloomily.

"You ought to understand how serious this is!" Aspenleaf scolded them with a growl. "Cherrykit and Lilackit might *die* if we don't succeed tomorrow!"

Needlekit stared at his paws. "Did Rainstar really kill kits from the other Clans?"

Aspenleaf's pale green eyes filled with sadness. "Yes, that's why you need to stay here; your father and I are just so worried about losing you... we couldn't lose another ki—" Aspenleaf broke off abruptly and shook her head. "Come on," she meowed hastily, leading her three kits back to the nursery.

Hailstorm watched them sadly, then let out a long sigh. Another battle with DayClan; and only one moon after the last one! So many cats had died last time. He shuddered to think how many cats would die tomorrow. And, if they didn't stop Rainstar for good, that number would just keep going up.

Chapter 13

"Run! Go! GO!" Star shrieked.

Echoheart didn't hesitate to follow the silver she-cat as she sprinted away from the huge black-furred creature. It lifted up its great big head from its meal with a snarl, and its beady black eyes narrowed maliciously as it heard the three cats' claws scraping over the stone in their effort to escape.

But Echoheart didn't look back.

"What... was... that?" Whispersong demanded as they skidded to a halt.

The creature's growls sounded far away now. Echoheart's chest was heaving so much that she felt she had just run all the way from the mountains to the Clans and back again. Her heart was leaping into her throat, and her fur was spiked in terror.

Star had collapsed. She closed her eyes, her flanks rising and falling rapidly. She didn't seem to have heard Whispersong.

Echoheart looked around wildly then sighed in relief. There weren't any other animals near them.

Echoheart's mind flashed back to that creature in fear. That creature, the one they'd just run from, was the *danger*. The danger in StarClan's prophecy! Echoheart shook her head in terror. That animal was *huge* ! It was bigger than it had seemed in her vision!

And... Echoheart shuddered. *That was the* danger. *That's what the prophecy is warning us about.*

Echoheart turned to Whispersong, whose eyes reflected Echoheart's own horror at what they'd just seen. "That was the creature in our vision," Whispersong breathed, chest heaving.

Echoheart nodded, swaying slightly. Then Echoheart turned to Star,

who was beginning to sit up. "What is it?" Echoheart demanded. "The creature; what's it called?"

The silver she-cat looked up, terror in her green and blue eyes. "That... was..." she heaved for breath. "It was a... a *bear*."

* * *

When they reached the Tribe's cave once more, Echoheart's heart was still hammering her chest.

Bumblefrost caught sight of them wobbling and raced to Whispersong's side. "What happened?" he demanded, a worried edge to his voice.

"We saw... the... the d-danger," Whispersong stammered.

"The danger?" Bumblefrost stiffened. "*The* danger? What we came here to find out about? The thing you two had dreams about?"

Whispersong nodded weakly, and Bumblefrost's eyes widened.

"Let's find somewhere quiet and we'll tell you about it," Echoheart murmured, shivering despite the warmth of the cave.

"What about her?" Bumblefrost looked at Star.

"She stays," Whispersong murmured.

They exited the cave again to find a spot where they wouldn't be overheard.

"Here's good," Star meowed, pointing with her nose at a ledge close to the waterfall; the water's roaring would block their conversation from the other cats.

Bumblefrost sat down next to Whispersong, licking her spiked fur and looking concerned. "Well? What happened?" he demanded.

Echoheart told him everything that they'd discovered in the last few

days, what they hadn't told him yet. She told him about the conversation with Stoneteller, Star's strange destiny, the ties between StarClan and the Tribe of Endless Hunting, their find of what Star called the *bear* today...

"Wait... are you saying that... Star is coming back with us to the forest?" Bumblefrost exclaimed when Echoheart had finished.

"We don't know yet," Star murmured, looking like she didn't want to think it could be true.

"We don't exactly know what StarClan and the Tribe of Endless Hunting meant when they sent Star, Echoheart, and I similar signs and dreams," Whispersong meowed, still shivering. "But it's unusual."

Bumblefrost nodded mutely, tail twitching.

"But, now that we know the danger, when will we start heading home?" Echoheart asked urgently. The bear seemed so much worse than it had in her dream, and fear for her Clanmates back home was beginning to envelope her. They needed to protect their Clanmates, all the Clans, from that bear! What if it was in the forest right now? What if it was killing the forest cats one by one? They needed to get home soon!

"I think we should leave as soon as we can," Whispersong murmured, shivering. "We need to be ready."

"How about tomorrow then?" Bumblefrost asked.

Echoheart's heart leapt in excitement. *Tomorrow?*

But Whispersong meowed, "That seems too soon, way too soon. And too sudden. I mean, I'd like to leave here and get home too. But we don't know much about the danger, only that it's called a bear. We need to know was much as we can before we leave; we won't be able to come back."

"I don't know..." Echoheart meowed quietly, "We really should get going; we've been gone for nearly two and a half moons now, and it'll take nearly a moon to get home. And what if the bear is already

in the forest?"

Whispersong sighed. "I know, but..."

"But *tomorrow*?" Star exclaimed, sounding worried and sad.

"Are you coming with us?" Echoheart asked the silver to-be.

Star looked at her paws and sighed. "I... Yes? It... It seems that that's where the stars will lead me."

"Then we'll have to tell your Tribe... and Stoneteller," Whispersong meowed quietly.

Star nodded, looking distant.

"Shall we go then?"

"Yes," Echoheart answered quietly. Her heart hammered in her chest once more, not because she was still tired after sprinting back to the cave; she was going home! Excitement and fear filled her body at once: excitement to finally get back home, and fear of what they'd find when they got there.

She stepped behind the waterfall that pounded the stone and followed Star across the cave. "Stoneteller?" Star meowed shakily at the Healer's den entrance.

Stoneteller appeared after a few heartbeats, looking surprised to see four cats waiting for him. "You're back already?"

Echoheart nodded. "We found the... the danger."

Stoneteller widened his yellow eyes in shock. "Really? That fast?" Then he turned to Star. "Did *you* recognize it? How did you know it was the danger?"

"It's a bear," Star meowed flatly.

"A bear?" Stoneteller exclaimed, looking worried. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Whispersong spoke up. "I recognized it immediately; it was

like I was living in one of my nightmares."

Echoheart nodded; that was exactly how she had felt.

"I don't know how I didn't know that the creature in my dream was a bear... But I guess I was more focused on helping the foreign cats that were in my dream than looking at the creature." Star shivered.

"Well," Stoneteller muttered. "You'll need to leave back to your Tribes then, or... don't you call them something else?"

"Clans," Bumblefrost meowed quietly.

Stoneteller nodded at him. "You'll need to get home to your Clans as soon as possible."

They all nodded.

"And what about you, Star?" Stoneteller asked.

Star blinked, looking scared. "I'm... I'm going with them. It's where, I think, the stars will lead me, like the Tribe of Endless Hunting and the starry spirit cat told me. 'You must follow the stars to another sky, and they will follow you'."

Stoneteller nodded. "It is your choice. The Tribe of Endless Hunting is guiding you, yes; but in the end you must decide the path of your destiny." He then turned to Echoheart and Whispersong. "When are you going to leave?"

"We were thinking tomorrow," Whispersong meowed quietly, "But we're not sure yet."

"Well, whatever you decide, we'll need to hold a farewell ceremony for Star before you leave," Stoneteller blinked solemnly at the small silver Tribe-cat.

They all nodded.

Later that evening, after much debating and differing viewpoints between Whispersong, Bumblefrost, Echoheart, and Star, they finally decided that they would leave in two days; tomorrow, they

suggested to Stoneteller, they could have Star's farewell ceremony, and, the next day, they'd leave at dawn and head home.

Echoheart shared a meal with Bumblefrost and Whispersong, while Star ate with her fellow to-bes: Crevice, Owl, Dawn, and Feather.

Seed and her son, Dust, were sharing meals with Moss and her kits, Howl and Night. Screech, the broad-shouldered, brown-furred tom, was chatting to two of his fellow cave-guards, Moth and an orange she-cat Echoheart didn't know the name of. Flower and Rain, two of the prey-hunters, were sharing their meals with Leaf and Fade, other prey-hunters, and with Stoneteller.

Echoheart sighed. Even though she was happy to be heading home soon, she would miss these mountain cats with their strange traditions, foreign accents, and difficult-to-remember names. She, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost had been here in the mountains with the Tribe for just over a moon; it had started to feel like a sort of home to Echoheart. It was definitely not the DawnClan camp, but it was a place where they'd been given shelter, food, and even a role in the Tribe's daily lives.

"Echoheart?" Whispersong nudged her.

Echoheart shook herself back into reality. "Yeah?"

"The sun is nearly down; let's get to bed," Whispersong meowed.

"Yes, I'm tired," yawned Bumblefrost.

Echoheart nodded and wearily followed the two warriors to the den that they'd been given when they first arrived at the Tribe of Rushing Water. She lied down on the sparse moss and feathers she had in her nest, drier than in the forest, and curled up with her back pressed to Whispersong's. She tucked her tail over her legs and rested her chin on her front paws.

She dreamed she was back home, with Hailstorm beside her. They walked through the forest, with no danger to worry about, no prophecy to fulfill. Kits ran around them, chasing each other without the worry that they could die any heartbeat because of a

bear lurking in the shadows.

Echoheart turned to Hailstorm, but suddenly he had become Rainstar. The DayClan leader smiled maliciously, ice-blue eyes now blood-red.

Echoheart sensed fear around her, everywhere. Something horrible was happening. She sensed anger, but she also sensed happiness and feelings of superiority.

Rainstar laughed hysterically, blood on her paws and dripping from her mouth. Her eyes had turned black, and blood was pooling around her. Somewhere in the distance, kits were screaming.

"No!"

Echoheart jerked awake, sweating. Bumblefrost and Whispersong were awake too. Bumblefrost was looking wildly between Whispersong and Echoheart.

Echoheart was still breathing fast, the dream fresh on her mind.

Then Echoheart saw her sister. She too was shaking and breathing fast. Her silver tabby pelt was bristled and her brown eyes were wide.

"What? What's this about?" Bumblefrost asked sharply.

"I had a dream about home, again, like I did on our way here. Something bad... is... happening..." Whispersong panted.

Echoheart whipped around, heart leaping up to her throat. "I had a dream about something bad happening too," she murmured in shock, flanks heaving and heart thumping.

"What?" Bumblefrost looked aghast.

"I... It was like the last one I had," Whispersong murmured, "I woke up remembering herbs..." She shuddered. "In the dream, there was blood everywhere, and cats were hissing and kits were screaming. Then... then I remembered that lavender is sometimes used to... to mask the stench of death."

"But..." Bumblefrost stuttered. "It's... It's only a dream, right?"

"I don't t-think so," Whispersong meowed quietly. "Something bad is happening again with the Clans, again."

"I had a dream t-too," Echoheart murmured. "Not about herbs. But I *felt* that something bad was happening. I was staring at Rainstar, who looked quite happy, and there was blood all over her paws and mouth. I... I sensed fear, so much fear that it was almost unbearable. I also sensed anger, then ha-happiness from somewhere else... Then... Then a kit screamed, and I w-woke up." She turned to her sister. "I've... I've been able to sense feelings since before we left here. I knew you were sneaking out to see Bumblefrost at night because I sensed your excitement and guilt. And that's also why I was the only one to suspect anything."

Whispersong blinked. "I started being able to remember herbs be-before we left, like you with sensing emotions... but I never said anything..." Whispersong trailed off.

"So," Bumblefrost interjected. "The dream. It... It has to do with Rainstar, right?" Bumblefrost asked. "It's not the danger? No bear?"

"No," Echoheart shuddered. "I don't think it's a bear, but it's Rainstar, and... cats are going to die back home. I think it's worse than the last thing that happened, because this time we *both* had a dream, whereas last time only you had a dream." She stared at Whispersong in worry.

"We need to help them!" Whispersong exclaimed suddenly, brown eyes glazed with fear.

"We can't," Echoheart replied, shaking. "It's impossible," she sighed. "There's nothing we can do."

"Oh, StarClan," Bumblefrost murmured. "Why are you letting my Clan do this?"

* * *

Stoneteller sat on a large ledge, looking over his gathered Tribe in the early evening light. The Tribe had left the cave, climbed around and up the side of it, then gathered on top of it.

Echoheart glanced behind her at the river rushing over the edge, making the waterfall that cascaded over the Tribe cave. Mist rose around it and blew toward them in the brisk wind.

She turned back around and stared at Stoneteller, his brown tabby pelt unusually bright in the sunlight. Echoheart stared at him. *It must be nice to have ceremonies*, Echoheart realized. *Or else Stoneteller would never be able to leave the cave*. If Echoheart lived in the Tribe of Rushing Water, she'd never want to be a Tribe Healer; she wouldn't be able to stand staying in that cave all her life: no hunting, no running, no fresh air, no excitement...

Echoheart felt a hard shove in the ribs from Whispersong and realized that Stoneteller was now speaking.

"...gather here today in farewell to one of our Tribe. No, no cat died," Stoneteller added at the look of shock on every Tribe cat's face. "And no I'm not talking about Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost, though I hope you all have treated them like one of us while they've been here." He paused. "No, I'm talking about one of own young Tribemates; she has lead a different and confusing life; filled with haunted dreams from the Tribe of Endless Hunting."

Every Tribe cat widened their eyes in shock, and Echoheart remembered that only the Healer was supposed to receive dreams from their ancestors. "She told me everything, and, like I'm sure you're thinking right now, she worried that she was meant to replace me. She was scared. But none of her dreams pointed to this." Stoneteller scanned the Tribe. "No, she had dreams about foreign cats in a strange forest, with more trees than we've ever seen, more plant life, more prey, less predators, longer warm seasons. She saw stars above her, stars that looked unfamiliar to her eyes but felt familiar to her heart. They were another set of ancestors that belonged to other cats. She was dreaming, of course, about Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost's home."

There was a shocked silence in which Echoheart, Whispersong, and

Bumblefrost received many stares.

"And many of you have been wondering why these three cats have journeyed all this way to us. They had received dreams about a danger from their own ancestors. Something is going to happen to their Tribemates, or, as they call them, their Clanmates. They were told that mountain cats could help. They had to journey for a moon, through grass-filled prairies, across endlessly winding rivers, and up the towering rocky spires of the mountains, not knowing whether or not they'd ever find what they'd set out to find, or if they'd ever even return."

Every Tribe cat was staring at the three Clan warriors now, awe shimmering in their eyes, as if Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost had come down from Silverpelt itself.

"Now, I bet you are wondering who, in our Tribe," Stoneteller began again, "has been sent dreams about *their* dangers." Every cat turned again to look up at their Healer, his yellow eyes scanning the gathered cats. "Star That Shines Bright, step forward."

Star jerked involuntarily, eyes wide. She shyly got to her paws and leapt up beside Stoneteller while the clearing was filled with whispering and shock.

"*Star* received dreams from the Tribe of Endless Hunting?"

"That *can't* be right! She's only a to-be!"

"And a young one at that!"

"Look how small she is!"

"I thought for sure it'd be an older cat with more experience."

Stoneteller raised his thick tabby tail for silence. Voices trailed off as cats turned to look at Star and Stoneteller.

"Hers, Echoheart's, and Whispersong's dreams match. Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost came here to find out about a danger that will strike their homes. Yesterday, Star lead Echoheart and Whispersong through our vast territory, and they ran into it."

"It?" Seed asked faintly, pulling her kit, Dust, closer.

"A bear."

The Tribe cats gasped all at once.

"We haven't seen them since—"

"It's *impossible* to drive bears out, let alone kill them!"

"What if the bear finds its way here? To the cave?"

"Yeah, what if the bear finds *us* ?"

Cats nodded and yowled out in worry.

Echoheart's stomach clenched. She felt her throat go dry in fear and she felt Whispersong stiffen beside her. *What if we did lead the bear to these cats? Would it follow our scent? It'd be our fault.* She shuddered. *No,* she told herself firmly. *StarClan said nothing about the danger affecting the mountain cats, didn't they? Did they?* But even as she thought it, she doubted herself. StarClan couldn't predict everything; a bear could follow its nose and walk right into the cave, where every cat would be trapped... helpless, waiting for its jaws to clamp shut over their necks, ending everything...

Echoheart shuddered. And even if the bear didn't come here, to the Tribe's cave, another would be wandering through the forest soon enough, through her home. It'd find the Clans like StarClan prophesized.

We need to go home now.

Echoheart took a deep breath, telling herself they'd be on their way first thing in the morning tomorrow; they couldn't do anything about bears at this very heartbeat anyway. *Every cat will be fine...*

As she pushed the thoughts away, she saw Stoneteller's mouth moving. He was speaking again. Echoheart strained her ears, trying to focus again upon the brown tom.

"...leaving first thing tomorrow, and Star is going with them. It's

Star's choice, and it's Star's destiny."

No cat spoke. Silence hung in the air.

"Star is... leaving?" Leaf stammered at last.

"Leaving the*Tribe* ?" Rain gasped.

Stoneteller sighed. "It's what was meant to happen, and what Star believes to be right."

Every cat was looking at Star with confusion and sadness now. Her silver tabby fur was glowing yellow as the sun sank behind the jagged horizon. She continued to stare at her paws, and Echoheart could just make out tears streaking from her one blue eye and one green eye.

Then she looked up. "I... It feels like a part of me has died inside... knowing I have to leave you, my home, and my Tribe. I almost wish it weren't true." She sighed, then sat taller. "But they need me." The small silver she-cat looked down at Echoheart and Whispersong, and Echoheart smiled sadly up at her. "Their Tribes, or, I mean their Clans, need me. The Tribe of Endless Hunting knows something I don't. They told me my destiny lies far from the mountains, in a place far beyond any Tribe cat before us has seen." She let out an uneven breath. "At first I was scared. But when I met Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost, I knew that our ancestors were right. I now know what I must do; I know it's what I need to do."

She paused, blinking sadly, and looked around her as the sunset turned the scattered clouds dark pink. "I'll miss these jagged peaks, this uneven territory that I call home. I'll miss days spent hunting and playing with my Tribemates, and the way we share meals and tell stories every evening." Star smiled and closed her eyes, as if taking in everything around her. "I'll miss the way the wind ruffles my fur, the way the waterfall tumbles over the gray stone, the way it sends mist swirling into the bright, endless blue sky." She opened her one blue and one green eye, glowing brighter in the sunset. "But I'll especially miss you: my Tribemates, my friends, my family. You mean more to me than I can say, more than you know. I never thought this day would come, but it's here. And now I say this to

you: don't grieve when I'm gone; don't try and feel sorry for me; don't try and stop me from going. I know now what I want to do, and... and leaving these mountains will just have to be a part of it."

Chapter 14

Hailstorm jerked awake, sweating and breathing heavily. The nightmare echoed in his mind ominously like rumbling thunder. He let out a ragged breath, then laid his head down on his moss nest again with a sigh.

He'd dreamt he was back in the previous battle with DayClan, where Twigfoot had— Hailstorm cut off this thought immediately and closed his eyes. He couldn't think about that now, not when they were so close to having another battle with DayClan. Hailstorm opened his eyes again and glanced around, noticing that he wasn't the only one awake; hardly any cat was sleeping in fear of what the coming morning would bring. Hailstorm turned toward the entrance of the warriors' den and, through the thick branches and silhouettes of cats lying around him, he saw the sky, gray with the very early signs of dawn.

Hailstorm's heart skipped a beat, and he let out a nervous, shaky breath. Dawn was arriving, which meant the battle couldn't be that far off. Hailstorm shuddered; he felt worse than he had before the last battle. Now that he'd had all night to worry, Hailstorm realized just how scared he was. Were any DawnClan cats going to die today? Hailstorm shivered and turned to look at his restless Clanmates. Would this be the last night he'd sleep in this den? Hailstorm felt his stomach clench in fear, and a lump formed in his throat. His heart thrummed irregularly in his chest, threatening to burst with terror.

Suddenly there was a commotion outside in the camp. Every cat in the den turned. A silhouette appeared against the gray sky for a moment, then it padded out of sight. Hailstorm could just make out a voice, whispering in the dark, "...NightClan agreed... coming... ran ahead... tell you..." It was Spruceclaw.

"Thank you... good... sunhigh..." That was Eveningstar speaking.

Hailstorm turned back towards the inside of the den as Rustypelt,

Sunfur, and Sparktail got to their paws around him. Soon every cat was getting up and exiting the den, so Hailstorm forced his trembling legs to stand, then he followed the other warriors into the warm, early- morning air.

The first cats Hailstorm saw were Eveningstar and Spruceclaw, who looked out of breath; he must have run ahead to tell Eveningstar that NightClan was on its way.

"How many cats did Beechstar bring?" Eveningstar asked.

"More than a normal battle patrol; I think they still want to avenge their Clanmates who died against DayClan at the last battle; they were really eager to join us."

Eveningstar nodded. "Good. Thank you, Spruceclaw. You may rest in the time we have left now."

Spruceclaw dipped his head and padded tiredly over to the elders' den.

Eveningstar turned his head and saw all of the warriors who had emerged from the warriors' den. He sighed. "You should eat. You all need your strength."

Every cat nodded distantly and walked trance-like over to the old, moss-covered fresh-kill log. Hailstorm grabbed a small mouse and sat down. He took a bite, hardly tasting it.

He glanced around him. Needlekit, Rosekit, and Pinekit were watching the warriors with longing, and Rayclaw sat near them, far away from all the warriors, with Stormpaw crouching fearfully beside him. Hailstorm blinked in surprise. He had forgotten that the DayClan apprentice was here.

Hailstorm tore his attention away from Stormpaw as he smelled a new scent on the warm breeze. He turned his head, as did every other warrior around him. He sniffed the air. NightClan.

Eveningstar must have scented it too, for he stepped toward the camp entrance. He dipped his head at the cream-furred tom at the head of the patrol. "Hello, Beechstar, how are you?"

The NightClan leader stepped further inside the camp entrance with a large group of cats, all wary-eyed and tense, close behind him. Copperleaf, Moonshine, and the rest of Spruceclaw's patrol were behind them.

Beechstar shook his head with a sigh. "We are doing fine prey-wise and health-wise, but..." He sighed and cut off his sentence, and Hailstorm knew he was thinking of Darkkit, recently killed by Rainstar, and Shadowkit, still imprisoned in DayClan's camp.

Eveningstar nodded in understanding. "Thank you for coming, Beechstar."

Mapleleaf, the NightClan deputy, spoke up. "We would never miss a chance to make Rainstar pay for what she and her Clan have done, especially now that she's killed one of our kits."

Hailstorm saw Larksong, the dark brown tabby NightClan queen, shake her head in despair. Hailstorm remembered that she had volunteered to foster Darkkit and Shadowkit alongside her own kit after Darkkit's and Shadowkit's mother had died at the last battle. Hailstorm sighed sadly. And now Darkkit was gone.

"Have you eaten?" Eveningstar asked the NightClan cats.

Beechstar nodded, but didn't speak. Hailstorm could sense the fear escalating in all the cats around him, DawnClan and NightClan alike, and he felt his own heart begin to race as the terror began to set in.

Would they succeed today? Would any cats die?

Hailstorm shuddered as he again wondered, *Will this be the last day I ever see?* He shook his head. No matter what happened, he would fight his hardest to free the kits from DayClan's clutches. *Even if it means I die...*

Hailstorm shivered. But he *couldn't* die! What about his Clanmates? They needed him!

Hailstorm's heart skipped a beat. What about Echoheart? What if she returned to find that Hailstorm was dead? Hailstorm's heart

ached at the thought.

I must survive, not only for my Clan, but for Echoheart. Hailstorm took an uneven breath. *Please, StarClan, if you truly haven't abandoned us, protect me at the coming battle; I'll need your strength, and so will every one of my Clanmates. Protect all of us. With all the powers of the sky and the sun and the stars, protect us... please. Show me Twigfoot was right... show me, that you're here for us... that you're here for me, like you said you were...*

Hailstorm squeezed his eyes shut tight and hung his head low on his sagging shoulders. Would StarClan *really* be watching out for them today?

Hailstorm jumped in fright as some cat brushed against him. He turned, but no cat was near him. He sniffed the air in confusion.

He stiffened in shock. *Twigfoot* ?

He could have sworn to StarClan he'd just smelled his father's scent. Hailstorm looked around, heart racing. No one was there.

"StarClan will be with you, always... *I* will be with you... never forget... never doubt..."

"Twigfoot!" Hailstorm exclaimed as he recognized his father speaking.

Hailstorm glanced at his Clanmates around him, but no one was paying any attention. Why couldn't they hear their former deputy's voice?

"Are you alright, Hailstorm?" Clovertail asked from behind him, jerking Hailstorm back to reality.

"I... I heard..." Should he tell his sister that he'd heard their father's voice? "I..." he began hesitantly, then meowed, "I heard Twigfoot."

Clovertail didn't move. She flicked her ears. "You what?"

"I heard Twigfoot. Talking to me."

Clovertail looked worried. "I... I think you're just tired, Hailsto—"

"I HEARD TWIGFOOT!" He didn't know where his rage had suddenly come from, but he was shouting, tears in his eyes. "I smelled him! I heard him!"

Clovertail flinched, then she widened her eyes, staring over Hailstorm's shoulder. Hailstorm turned. Twigfoot's faded starry outline stood before them. But before Clovertail could call out to him, he had disappeared with the hot green-leaf breeze.

"StarClan will be with you, always... always..."

Hailstorm was just about to say, "I told you I heard him!", but then he saw Clovertail's expression; her pale green eyes were full of fresh grief, and her tears fell to the dusty ground.

"He'll watch over us," Hailstorm meowed quietly.

"I know," Clovertail sniffled.

Hailstorm sighed. "*All* of StarClan will."

Clovertail nodded mutely, staring at her paws.

"There's Creekfall!" Aspenleaf called out suddenly. "And Eaglefeather and Twilightfoot!"

Hailstorm turned. Twilightfoot, Creekfall, and Eaglefeather were walking into the camp, with Orangestar and his DuskClan patrol behind them.

"Eveningstar," Orangestar addressed the DawnClan leader sadly as the DuskClan cats reached the camp. Hailstorm felt a stab of pity. Orangestar and his mate, Gingerfur, had had their three new kits— Scarletkit, Redkit, and Amberkit— stolen by DayClan; and Redkit had been murdered.

Hailstorm shook with hatred. DayClan was going to get it today; they were going to regret everything they'd ever done to the other Clans.

Eveningstar was now gathering all of the cats from DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan in the clearing. Eveningstar invited the other two leaders up onto the High-stone, then he called all their cats into the clearing.

Hailstorm turned as Eveningstar spoke. "We are gathered here together to launch an attack on DayClan's camp," Eveningstar began, the white fur of his underbelly now scarlet in the dawn light. "The goal: rescue our kits. We will show DayClan that it was a mistake to do everything they have done to us. We will avenge all the deaths they've caused, but we have one order: do not harm queens and kits. We are not like Rainstar. We will not take advantage of the weak like DayClan has been."

Beechstar stepped forward. "Let today mark the end of DayClan's tyranny. Today, we will stop Rainstar. Today, DayClan will be sorry they ever thought they could control us. Today is the end of this evil!"

The clearing burst into yowling.

"Remember, were fighting for our kits, we're fighting for their future; a future where they will be safer," Orangestar called, sorrow embedded deep in his voice. "Show DayClan that we will never give up in the face of our Clanmates' safety, no matter the costs!" he growled.

Every cat in the clearing yowled their agreement— DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan alike. Hailstorm raised his voice to the sky, hoping StarClan heard his call and that they would be with him as the three Clans fought DayClan.

Hailstorm looked up through the clearing of trees above him as the first morning sunlight pierced the pale blue sky and sliced through the DawnClan forest. A crow cawed ominously in the distance, and Hailstorm shivered; it was as if it were a warning, a cry of foreboding as the looming battle drew nearer.

* * *

The hot morning sun blazed in the sky, floating just above the

treetops.

Hailstorm rocked his haunches and sprang off the muddy bank of the river and onto the slippery, wet, protruding stepping-stone. He readied his paws and leapt again. Cold mist from below dampened his fur, and the rushing, white-foamed water around him roared in his ears. He looked up from the river at DayClan territory, where Eveningstar and Gravelpelt were waiting for him, looking tense. He sprang, concentrating on the grassy bank ahead.

Eveningstar had divided up the battle patrols just after the pre-battle meeting. Hailstorm was to be in the first group to attack DayClan, along with a patrol of DawnClan warriors lead by Eveningstar.

Stormpaw had suggested this morning, just before they had left, that if the first group to attack was made of cats from only one Clan, Rainstar would believe she could win easier. It would be a real shock to find the second wave of attackers filled with DuskClan and NightClan cats as well. The surprise, Stormpaw had said, would throw Rainstar off and make her easier to beat.

Hailstorm looked behind him at the rest of the patrol as his paws landed in the wet clay on the DayClan side of the river. Sparrowtail, Sunfur, Creekfall, Meadowheart, Rustypelt, Sparktail, and Moonshine were on the DawnClan riverbank, and they were going to be on the first attack patrol with him. He watched as they began to make their way slowly across the wide river cutting through the meadow and dividing DayClan from DawnClan.

The rest of the DawnClan warriors— Eaglefeather, Bronzepelt, Sagetail, Clovertail, and Aspenleaf— would join the second wave of attackers along with cats from NightClan and DuskClan.

And staying at the camp were Aspenleaf's three kits, the elders, the two medicine cats, and Rayclaw and Stormpaw. Eveningstar had ordered Stormpaw to stay at the camp; if Rainstar saw her at the battle, Stormpaw would be in danger from her own Clan; and every cat knew that Stormpaw couldn't bear to fight her own Clanmates, even if she knew they were doing wrong. Rayclaw had volunteered to stay with her and keep her company, and he'd also be able to

help watch Aspenleaf's kits.

Hailstorm watched as Moonshine, the last cat to cross, joined him beside the bank, gave him a sad smile, then followed Eveningstar as they set off again.

Now they were slinking through the DayClan meadow, creeping by scattered bushes and lichen-covered boulders that dotted the grassy hills.

The meadow soon gave way to the moor, and Hailstorm felt foreboding building inside him as they journeyed into the heart of DayClan territory. His fear collided with exhaustion and the intensifying heat, and he found himself jumping at every sound—from a bee buzzing past his ear to the grass rustling behind him. His eyes darted frantically and he felt as though they were being watched.

They can't know we're here, Hailstorm thought. DayClan cats were supposed to be meeting a DawnClan patrol at the border at sunhigh for DawnClan's surrender; but by then the attack should have already been nearly over with.

Hailstorm shuddered. He was adding up everything that could go wrong in this plan, and he pondered the idea that DayClan knew they were coming, and had killed Cherrykit and Lilackit before they even arrived, as a punishment, or to weaken DawnClan's attack... Hailstorm couldn't bear the thought. He shook his head. *They cannot possibly know we're coming.*

But did they know? *Could* they know? Hailstorm felt his throat go dry at the thought, and he realized just how terrified he actually was. His heart was pounding irregularly, and once or twice he could have sworn it was going to jump right out of his chest. His fur was plastered to his skin as the heat and nerves got to him. He panted and sweated, dread and panic growing rapidly with every footstep he took.

He could sense the fear in his Clanmates as well as they padded alongside him. And, knowing that kits' lives depended on them, the terror was skyrocketed.

"Smell that?" Gravelpelt hissed suddenly.

The exhausted and heat-swept patrol paused at the base of a hill, which offered minimum shade against the hot weather. Every cat crouched low, tasting the air. Hailstorm smelled what Gravelpelt had been talking about: DayClan, and strong, too.

"Its coming from... from over that hill," Creekfall panted, pointing with his sweaty nose at the top of the hill that they stood next too.

"Maybe that's where DayClan's camp is, over the hill," Rustypelt suggested in a long, uneven breath that came out as a whisper.

"Let's check." Sunfur nodded at the long-haired gray-brown tom. Hailstorm felt every cat's fear around him increase greatly. This could be it. DayClan's camp could be right over this hill. Hailstorm tried to keep his breath steady.

Eveningstar, who looked just as sweaty, exhausted, and nervous as his Clanmates, nodded and panted, "Follow me, quietly."

Hailstorm took a few quick breaths, trying to ignore the fear exploding inside him, and followed his leader up the grassy hill. The heat burned his back, and his head already hung low in exhaustion. He panted and glanced ahead; Eveningstar had reached the top of the hill. He stiffened and dropped to the ground, tail bushing up. Hailstorm's heart skipped a beat. Had they been caught?

Sunfur slunk up the hill and stopped beside her leader. She peered over the top.

"What is it?" Sparrowtail hissed fearfully, crouching low in the grass.

Sunfur turned around. "It is their camp. Right at the base of this hill," she whispered.

Eveningstar slowly made his way back down toward the group of warriors huddled halfway up the hill, Sunfur following him. "No cat saw us," he whispered. "But we need to lead the attack soon. Orangestar and Beechstar are probably on their way now."

Every cat nodded weakly.

"Their camp is well protected. They have a few large boulders in and around it, and clumps of bushes too. The bushes are dens. If you smell DayClan kit-scent, do not harm their queens or kits; this is an attack to rescue *our* kits.

"Sunfur, you will lead the patrol that will rescue the kits. Sparrowtail, Hailstorm, Moonshine, Rustypelt, and Sparktail, you will be on her patrol. Fight *any* cat guarding the kits, even if it is a queen. Don't harm queens if they're trying to protect their own kits or aren't involved in the fighting, but fight any cat preventing you from rescuing our kits."

Every cat nodded. The heat and terror together made Hailstorm feel nauseous, and he found it hard to concentrate on what Eveningstar was saying.

"Now, the rest of you, follow me and try to keep DayClan cats away from where our kits are, but also try and find Rainstar. Remember our other goal: get rid of Rainstar and her plans once and for all. We won't kill her; that won't work since she has more than one of her nine lives still remaining. But we will drive her out, or at least we can try." Eveningstar looked at all of them and sighed. "This will be one of the toughest battles we've fought against DayClan. Remember: the kits' lives are depending on us, and every other Clan is depending on each other to try and drive Rainstar from DayClan and rid the forest of her tyranny."

Eveningstar paused again, panting in the heat. He looked at each of them in turn, his brown eyes filled deep with trust and caring, and Hailstorm was glad Eveningstar would be the one leading them into this battle. Hailstorm couldn't ask for a better leader.

Eveningstar took another deep breath and muttered, "May StarClan watch over us all." The he turned and crept up the hill, and Hailstorm, shaking, followed him. He blinked away the brightness of the sun as he reached the top of the hill and glanced down at the clumps of sage and heather surrounding large stones and boulders. Thin grass covered the ground like moss, and Hailstorm could see the DayClan cats milling about their day, unaware of the DawnClan

cats on the hill above them.

"DawnClan, attack!" Eveningstar yowled.

Hailstorm bunched his muscles and sprang from the grass. The DawnClan warriors streamed over the hill and flooded into DayClan's camp, yowling battle cries. DayClan cats clashed with DawnClan, and howls of shock filled the air. Hailstorm bared his teeth, all fear and exhaustion forgotten as he heard a kit scream. He unsheathed his claws and, heart pounding, leapt into the thick of the battle.

Chapter 15

Hailstorm collided with a DayClan cat. He clawed, got to his paws, and saw Bristlepine flinch away in surprise.

The DayClan deputy let out a hiss. "What are *you* doing?" he exclaimed, clearing shocked. Hailstorm didn't answer. In the heartbeat it took Bristlepine to ask him that question, Hailstorm was on top of him, dragging him into the dirt.

Then pain exploded in his side like fire as claws met his flesh. He let out a loud hiss and clawed at the place where the DayClan deputy was. But Hailstorm's claws raked nothing but air. He looked around desperately as the cat's claws dug deeper, and he saw Flamepaw dragging him away from the DayClan deputy. Hailstorm whipped his body around to face her and kicked his back legs as hard as he could. He missed his mark, and Flamepaw dodged aside. Hailstorm leapt to his paws and launched himself at her. But she was ready. Hailstorm lost his balance and hit the ground hard.

"Are you a warrior or not?" Flamepaw taunted. "Fight like a real cat!"

Hailstorm felt anger surge inside him. He spun around and ran at the apprentice; he bowled her over and pushed her into a boulder. She kicked him hard as he tried to claw at her stomach, and Hailstorm felt her claws rake across his face; he let out a howl of pain and flinched away. He could feel the raw, red skin stinging on his face, and he scrunched up his eyes.

Then Flamepaw was on top of him. Hailstorm rolled over, but she was already on her feet again and slashing at him. Hailstorm blocked her blow, only to find that she was ready yet again. He tried to get to his paws, but she pushed him back over, taunting him again.

StarClan help!

Hailstorm let out a grunt of pain as his head hit the dirt. Why was she so good at fighting? She was only an apprentice!

Flamepaw suddenly let out a squeal. Hailstorm leapt to his paws and whipped around. Creekfall was wrestling her to the ground, hissing and spitting. Dust clouded around them as the two cats rolled over and over, claw marks appearing on their pelts.

Then Creekfall glanced at Hailstorm, gray eyes wide. "Find the kits!"

Hailstorm raced away, letting Creekfall finish Flamepaw. Creekfall was right; he *needed* to find Cherrykit and Lilackit; he was on the kit-rescue patrol!

"Fox-hearts! No!" Hawktuft, a brown-furred DayClan warrior, suddenly hollered from behind a gorse bush. Hailstorm turned to see what she was looking at, dust blurring his vision.

Orangestar, the DuskClan cats, and Eaglefeather, Aspenleaf, Sagetail, and Bronzepelt were racing into the DayClan camp, yowling in rage as they extended their claws and flew into the battle.

"There's more coming!" Bristlepine snarled, leaping onto a boulder with Applefang beside him. "They're *DuskClan* cats! DayClan, stand strong! Hold your ground!"

"We're outnumbered!" a dark tortoiseshell DayClan elder yowled, her eyes wide as she stood frightfully beside an old, yellow tabby she-cat.

"Patchnose, Nectarleaf, move!" yowled Weedfoot to the two elders, shoving them aside.

Foxfang's angry howl sounded above the rest as Gingerfur raced at him, tackling him viciously to the ground. "What should we do, Rainstar?" he hollered as he desperately squirmed beneath Gingerfur's sharp grip.

Hailstorm looked around through the masses of fighting cats around him, but he couldn't spot the white and black pelt of the DayClan leader. *Where is Rainstar?*

A DuskClan cat suddenly raced by Hailstorm, yowling in anger as she flung herself at a DayClan cat. Hailstorm shook away his thoughts of Rainstar and looked up at the hill outside the DayClan camp. The DuskClan cats continued to flood in with the remaining DawnClan warriors at their sides, pouring over the hilltop and flying into the thick of the battle. Hailstorm yowled in triumph as the DayClan cats scattered in confusion, weakened at the shock of DuskClan attacking as well as DawnClan.

Stormpaw's plan was working!

"Hailstorm!"

Hailstorm jerked at his name.

Sunfur was yowling at him. "Watch out!" she screeched.

Hailstorm was knocked to the ground. Songtail and Weedfoot were on him in an instant, and Hailstorm felt their claws tearing at his fur. He bit hard at Songtail's shoulder, and she snarled. Weedfoot retaliated for her. He shoved Hailstorm, but Hailstorm was ready. He reared, bringing his claws down on the light brown tom's head. Weedfoot narrowed his eyes and hissed. Hailstorm hissed louder, lashing his tail. Songtail was getting to her laws, eyeing Hailstorm angrily, but then she turned and fled.

Weedfoot glanced at his Clanmate as she joined another fight, and, In the moment that Weedfoot wasn't focused, Hailstorm sprinted away, toward Sunfur, Sparktail, and Rustypelt, who were also on the kit-rescuing patrol. They needed to find the kits, and fast.

He skidded to an abrupt halt at Sunfur's side. "Where are Sparrowtail and Moonshine? They're the rest of the patrol!"

Rustypelt looked around frantically.

"There!" Sparktail shouted.

Hailstorm followed Sparktail's gaze. Moonshine was wrestling Frostwhisker, who was guarding a large clump of sage bushes viciously, while Sparrowtail was trying to get inside it.

"That's got to be where the kits are! Inside those sage bushes!" Sunfur exclaimed, racing toward Sparrowtail and Moonshine.

Hailstorm followed right behind her, dodging the fighting and snarling cats around him. He skidded in the dirt and leapt out of the way of two cats fighting in the grass, then suddenly he was on the ground. Hailstorm yowled in pain as he landed awkwardly on his shoulder. He whisked his head around to see who had tripped him.

A large black tom and a mottled gray- and tan-colored tom loomed over him. Hailstorm had seen them at Gatherings, but he had never heard their names.

Like names matter! Hailstorm thought angrily as he leapt to his paws to face them.

He arched his back, then clawed at the two warriors but missed. Hailstorm lost his balance, and the black tom raked Hailstorm's side with his razor-sharp claws; Hailstorm winced, then he sprang and bowled over the mottled tom and kicked at him hard with his hind claws. Hailstorm lashed out again, then bit the back of his leg, and tasted the salty blood on his tongue. It was revolting, but he clamped his jaws tighter. The DayClan warrior screeched, then ripped his leg away and angrily leapt to his paws, arching his back and flattening his ears.

Now the other tom was attacking, and he clawed Hailstorm across the nose. Dark crimson blood spattered the ground around them. Hailstorm winced and let out a howl as the dusty air stung the wound. He reared, then launched himself at both DayClan warriors facing him. He slashed the black tom's ear, then turned on the spot and grabbed hold of the other tom's shoulders with his claws and bit hard. The mottled tom staggered, yowling.

Hailstorm felt claws slash across his flank as the black tom recovered and tore Hailstorm off the other cat. Both DayClan warriors squared up to Hailstorm, shoulder to shoulder, hissing with backs arched.

"Coalpelt! Caverntooth!"

Both toms stopped fighting Hailstorm and turned toward the voice. Applefang was calling them urgently, staring at another wave of cats racing toward the camp: Beechstar and his NightClan patrol! Hailstorm hardly felt the pain of his cuts as he saw NightClan. Triumph filled his chest. They *had* to be beating DayClan now!

Coalpelt and Caverntooth raced toward the oncoming wave NightClan cats, snarling and hissing and leaving Hailstorm behind.

"Hailstorm! Come on!"

Hailstorm looked at Sparktail calling him, and he followed the red warrior toward the sage bushes once again, sprinting around the rolling and fighting cats.

Hailstorm shoved a dark gray DayClan queen aside, while Sunfur clawed Frostwhisker. The dark gray queen fought back, her green eyes narrowed in fury. Hailstorm arched his back. The queen slowly got to her paws and lashed her tail. Her dark gray fur was bristling and her teeth were bared. Hailstorm circled around her, then leapt. She rolled over, clawing and biting.

"Nettleberry!" Frostwhisker shouted at the gray she-cat. Frostwhisker slashed at Sunfur and stood up. "Go guard our kits! I'll fi-" But she was cut off as Sparrowtail launched herself on top of her.

Rustypelt grabbed hold of Nettleberry with sharp claws and pulled her away from Hailstorm, then she sprinted across the camp, colliding with Bronzepelt and Sagetail.

Then suddenly Pantherclaw raced to Sparrowtail's side, pulling Frostwhisker away from the bush she was guarding. Cliffsand, Snowfall, and Robintail were behind him, shoving the rest of the DayClan cats out of the way.

"Go get the kits! Hurry, before more DayClan cats come!" Robintail yowled at Sunfur.

Rustypelt and Moonshine raced inside the den, while Sunfur, Sparktail, Sparrowtail, and Hailstorm stayed outside to guard.

Squealing filled the air as Moonshine and Rustypelt disappeared inside the sage bush.

C*ome on, hurry...* Hailstorm thought as he stood in front of the bush. Cats were still fighting all over the camp, and any heartbeat now a DayClan cat could notice them, and then it'd be really hard to get the kits out of the DayClan camp safely.

Suddenly a loud snarl sounded above them. Hailstorm jerked his head up, heart racing. A white and black blur jumped over the bush and tackled Sparrowtail to the ground. Sunfur let out a screech of surprise, pelt bristling. Hailstorm lashed his tail and launched himself toward Sparrowtail, trying to help her, but he was knocked aside.

Rainstar hissed furiously. She clawed at the cats around her viciously and leapt into the den. A loud caterwaul echoed in Hailstorm's ears, then Rainstar reemerged from the sage den, paws bloodied, with Scarletkit in her mouth. The tiny DuskClan kit squealed in terror, trembling, her red nursery-soft fur spiked. Hailstorm tried to stop Rainstar, but she clawed him across the face, eyes burning with a fire he'd only seen once before: after Lightningkit had been killed.

Rainstar sprinted through the thick of the battle and leapt on top of the tallest boulder in the camp. She dropped Scaletkit by her paws, and the kit flopped and squeaked.

"Stop! STOP!" Rainstar hollered, sides heaving.

Every cat stiffened. Snowfall turned under Frostwhisker's paws; Blizzardclaw and Applefang slipped as they halted their battle. Eveningstar was still glaring at Bristlepine and Weedfoot, while Pebbletail and Falconflight's sides heaved as they lashed their tails at Songtail, Emberpaw, and Clayfur.

"Make one more move against my cats, and I'll kill this kit," Rainstar growled, claws on Scarletkit's throat. The tiny kit whimpered and mewled and squirmed.

Hailstorm drew in a sharp breath of hot air, heart pounding.

"No!" Gingerfur screamed. Orangestar silenced his mate with his tail, giving her a stern but meaningful look.

"Good," Rainstar crooned.

Scaletkit was trembling, and Hailstorm could see that she was crying. Although she was too young to form words, Hailstorm could tell that she was desperately calling for help.

Rainstar let out a frustrated snarl as Scarletkit yowled louder. "Quiet!"

"Don't you *dare* talk to my kit like that!" Gingerfur spat, shaking in fury and making a move toward Ranistar. "You heartless piece of fox-dung, you-"

Scarletkit shrieked an awful, heart-wrenching, ear-splitting scream. Cats in the clearing flinched and winced, even DayClan cats, as Rainstar pressed her claws harder on the half-moon old kit. Hailstorm felt his fur bristling in disgust and fury, and he saw cats all over preparing to spring at Rainstar. But before any cat could make a move, a sudden flash of white and black fur flew into the air and a deafening yowl echoed across the DayClan camp.

"NO!"

Suddenly Rainstar was knocked off the boulder she was standing on. The small white and black shape clawed at Rainstar as they both hit the ground with a loud thud.

Hailstorm felt a jolt of surprise. *Stormpaw?* She was supposed to be at the DawnClan camp! What was she doing here?

"You evil... heartless... fox-dunged flea-bag! I can't believe you'd even...!" the small DayClan apprentice spat.

Rainstar shoved her daughter away, blue eyes ice-cold with hatred. "You!"

Emberpaw let out a hiss from the crowd.

"Traitor!" Flamepaw snarled beside him.

Stormpaw ignored her littermates. She flexed her claws and glared at her mother. "I will not let you kill any more defenseless, innocent kits," she growled, back arched.

Rainstar laughed, a cold, bone-chilling laugh. "You never *let* me do anything, Stormpaw."

"Does your Clan mean *anything* to you?" Weedfoot growled at Stormpaw, ears flattened as he stood in the crowd of cats. "You helped them attack us, didn't you?" he spat.

Stormpaw flattened her ears. "DayClan isn't the Clan I grew up thinking it was. You've disgraced it's name," Stormpaw spat at Rainstar, "and I can no longer call it home."

"What are you going to do now?" Rainstar taunted, eyes narrowed maliciously. "Become a *loner*? Or a *kittypet*? Because you are no longer DayClan, and you are no longer my kit."

Stormpaw narrowed her eyes and snarled, "I don't *want* to be a part of DayClan. I don't want anything to do with it, or *you*." She lifted her chin and spat, "I don't care what happens to me as long as you no longer lead DayClan. And I told DawnClan I'd help them rescue their kits if it was the last thing I could do against you."

Hailstorm stiffened. He admired Stormpaw's courage, but what would Rainstar do to her now? The DayClan leader was shaking with fury. Her pelt was bristling and her claws slid out.

Hailstorm suddenly caught a glimpse of orange tabby fur flash by the edge of the DayClan camp. Rayclaw! The DawnClan warrior was watching Stormpaw from the bushes with worry, and his fur was bristled. He must have followed Stormpaw to the DayClan camp. Hailstorm gulped, then he turned back to Rainstar as Stormpaw let out an indignant sniff. The whole clearing was still as cats from all four Clans watched Rainstar and Stormpaw.

"Hailstorm," Sunfur whispered in his ear. Hailstorm jumped in fright. "Quick, while DayClan is distracted, go inside the den and get the kits out. Hurry!"

Hailstorm nodded and quickly slipped into the sage bush. Moonshine lay on her side, blood drying in her white fur. Hailstorm felt a stab of horror. "Moonshine?" he choked.

"She's alright," Rustypelt whispered, looking around in worry as an eerie silence filled the air outside. "Help me get the kits; I can't carry them all."

Hailstorm saw them. Amberkit, Shadowkit, Cherrykit, and Lilackit, all huddled together in the corner, eyes wide.

"Don't worry," Hailstorm told the petrified kits. "We'll get you safely out of here. Can you walk, Cherrykit and Lilackit?" They both nodded weakly, terror filling their eyes. "Okay, follow Rustypelt and I, and run like you've never run in your entire life. The DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan warriors out there may be able to hold off most of the DayClan cats, but we can't be sure. So run like StarClan is beside you, giving you the speed of one hundred warriors, okay?" The DawnClan kits nodded in terror.

Hailstorm turned to Rustypelt. "Can you carry Shadowkit? I'll get Amberkit." Rustypelt nodded, then stooped over and picked the black NightClan tom-kit up by his scruff. He mewled, but Rustypelt quickly comforted him.

Hailstorm let out a nervous breath. He turned to Amberkit. "I'm going to help you, alright? We'll get you to your mother and father again."

Amberkit blinked and let out a terrified squeak.

"We'll get you and your sister out of here," Hailstorm promised the tiny she-kit, though he wasn't sure what had happened to Scarletkit after Stormpaw had attacked Rainstar. He swallowed. If she was dead...

"Come on, Hailstorm," Rustypelt hissed through the NightClan kit's fur. The gray-brown tom glanced outside, where Stormpaw's angry voice filled the air.

"You don't deserve nine lives! You're a traitor to the warrior code

and to StarClan! You-"

Hailstorm spoke above the loud growling from outside. "What do we do once we're outside the den? They'll see us!" he fretted.

"The other cats will protect us. We just need to get these kits out of DayClan territory as fast as we can."

Hailstorm nodded, heart pounding.

Amberkit looked up at him, her ginger- and white-patched fur trembling. He let out another uneven breath, then grabbed the she-kit's scruff in his jaws. He glanced behind him to make sure Cherrykit and Lilackit were following, then he nodded at Rustypelt, who padded to the den entrance and peered outside to make sure it was safe.

Hailstorm heard a high-pitched caterwaul, and then suddenly the whole clearing was filled with commotion and snarling. The fighting had started again.

Hailstorm heard Rainstar screeching and Stormpaw growling as mother and daughter clawed at each other. Flamepaw and Emberpaw's furious voices echoed throughout the camp as they saw Stormpaw trying to harm their mother.

"Let's go, Hailstorm. Now!" Rustypelt growled, then he dashed from the den. Hailstorm scrambled after him, hissing at Cherrykit and Lilackit to follow. He sprinted from the den and nearly crashed into Sunfur. The deputy dashed after them, making sure no DayClan cats followed as they tried to escape the camp.

Suddenly Sunfur yowled in pain. Hailstorm skidded to a stop and turned around in worry, Amberkit swinging in his mouth. Cherrykit and Lilackit slammed into his side and followed Hailstorm's gaze. Coalpelt had pinned Sunfur to the ground, his ears flattened as he hissed in her face.

"Go!" Sunfur howled with a cough.

Then a voice echoed loudly in the thick, hot air. "The kits! They're escaping!"

Hailstorm's heart skipped a beat.

Suddenly Bristlepine leapt through the dust and tore after them, eyes burning with malicious determination. Hailstorm sprinted away, claws scraping at the dirt and grass; Cherrykit and Lilackit followed close behind him, and Amberkit squealed in terror in Hailstorm's jaws.

"Hailstorm! HELP!"

Cherrykit and Lilackit!

Time seemed to slow down. Hailstorm skidded to a halt, dust billowing into the air. He turned in horror as Bristlepine pounced at the two kits, aiming for the killing blow. Hailstorm yowled, nearly dropping Amberkit.

Then Eveningstar leapt forward, knocking Bristlepine aside in midair before he reached the kits. Gray fur blurred with brown, and Cherrykit scrambled away, Lilackit following in terror.

"Hurry!" Hailstorm yowled. He jerked his head around. Rustypelt was nowhere in sight.

The two DawnClan kits screamed again. Foxfang and Weedfoot now sprinted toward them, claws extended. Cherrykit barely dodged Foxfang, but Weedfoot pinned down Lilackit.

Lilackit hollered in pain. "Help!" she cried desperately.

Hailstorm couldn't move out of terror.

Suddenly Gingerfur was there, leaping off a boulder and raking her claws deep into Weedfoot's shoulder. Blood sprayed from the wound, and Weedfoot's teal eyes filled with rage and agony. Lilackit stumbled away from him as he released her, sprinting after her sister as fast as she could.

Then Mushroomcloud, Larksong, and Mapleleaf sprinted into view. Mushroomcloud had Scarletkit in her mouth, who was squealing in terror. Larksong and Mapleleaf scooped up Cherrykit and Lilackit, who yowled in fright, not knowing that the two cats were on their

side.

Cherrykit tried to claw at Mapleleaf. The NightClan deputy snarled through gritted teeth. "I'm helping you!"

They dashed by Hailstorm, and Hailstorm finally found his senses. He turned and fled after them. The intense heat washed over him again, but he ignored it and kept running.

Then suddenly his face hit the grass with an explosion of agony. Amberkit flew from his mouth and flopped onto the ground, mewling in pain.

Bristlepine was on top of him, growling and cursing him out. Hailstorm clawed, then saw a flash of black fur. His heart sank in horror. Coalpelt was attacking Amberkit!

Searing pain burned in his flank, but just then Hailstorm saw that the black cat was actually Pantherclaw, not Coalpelt, and he was rescuing Amberkit. Knowing that the kit was safe gave Hailstorm sudden strength. He kicked upward, launching Bristlepine off of him. The DayClan deputy's head hit a nearby boulder with a sickening thud, then he fell limply into the grass. He was dead.

Hailstorm staggered as he got to his paws. The kits and their rescuers were nowhere to be seen, but Hailstorm knew they were going to be safe.

Suddenly a furious snarl echoed across the moorland, and Hailstorm jerked his head toward the DayClan camp. He raced toward it, legs screaming with protest and heart thundering. He was exhausted beyond words, but he *had* to help his Clan.

He crashed through the bushes and landed beside Petalheart and Gravelpelt. Applefang and Clayfur were fleeing the camp, and Hailstorm noticed that Rainstar, Emberpaw, and Flamepaw were surrounded by cats from all of the other three Clans, hissing. Nettleberry and Frostwhisker fled too, each with one of their kits in their mouths, and Hawktuft followed carrying a third. Patchnose, one of the DayClan elders, sprinted away, leaving behind the body of the second elder, Nectarleaf, lying limp in the grass. Songtail,

Coalpelt, and Foxfang hid in the bushes, hissing warningly but not making any move to help their leader or her kits. And for the first time, Hailstorm saw Lilyfoot and Fernpaw, the DayClan medicine cats, hiding inside a gorse bush den, watching but not intervening.

Rainstar arched her back. "Mouse-brained fools!" she spat at the cats surrounding her.

"Shut up, Rainstar; your time in DayClan is *done*," Bronzepelt spat.

Rainstar laughed. "Yeah? And who's going to stop me from leading my Clanmates?"

Beechstar smiled maliciously. "Do you see your Clanmates? No, you don't. That's because none of them want to defend you."

"Well, they're mouse-brains then! I've been loyal to my Clan from the start; I became leader and was supported by them! And now, even after all I had done to give them their revenge, after all I had promised them, they leave me!" Rainstar hissed.

"Well, then you've sure gone downhill," Eaglefeather retorted.

"Yes, you abused your power," Robintail snarled, black and orange fur spiked in fury. "Taking advantage of other Clans' weaknesses, when there were always supposed to be four Clans."

Rainstar snorted. "You never understood how much pain the other three Clans caused me and my Clan all those seasons ago, so how *dare* you tell me I'm taking advantage over the weakness of the other Clans when you all-"

"Don't go talking blaming the other three Clans for things that never happened," spat Duckflight, lashing his tail.

"For things that never happened?" Rainstar sputtered. "You all just *ignored* what happened! It was DuskClan that-"

"Rainstar, stop talking. You're through," snarled Blizzardclaw. "No matter what happened to you in the past, killing innocent kits is *never* justifiable, especially not to take advantage of the other Clans in order to control them."

A chorus of approval followed the gray warrior's comment.

Orangestar nodded. "Yes, after today, our kits won't have to grow up worrying that DayClan is going to kidnap and kill them. The forest can finally go back to peace when you no longer control DayClan."

The cats from DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan slowly started pushing Rainstar and her two kits back towards the edge of the DayClan camp.

"Even if you drive me out, Bristlepine will become leader, and he shares the same views as me; he knows why I seek my revenge, even if you fox-hearted fools don't! He was there! So good luck with your stupid idea!"

"Bristlepine's dead," Hailstorm spat.

Rainstar froze in shock.

"Your precious deputy will be waiting for you in the Place of No Stars, just where both of you belong," Pebbletail snarled.

Rainstar laughed again. "You can't kill me. I still have some of my nine lives left!"

"Then we can kill you over and over again *until* you die!" Gravelpelt shouted from behind Clovertail and Beechstar, tail lashing.

"You can try, fox-hearts!" Rainstar spat, but she looked nervous now, and Emberpaw and Flamepaw looked frightened but still defiant.

"Then leave!" Gingerfur snarled.

"I'm no coward!" Rainstar hollered, blue eyes scorching with fury.

"You're outnumbered, Rainstar," Falconflight growled, his eyes smoldering. "Go. Run away, before it's too late."

"Make me," Rainstar spat.

It was the wrong thing to say. All at once the cats surrounding her attacked; Emberpaw and Flamepaw turned tail and ran toward the heart of the camp, eyes wide. Rainstar bit and clawed viciously, but soon her white fur was turning scarlet.

She yowled furiously, "You flea-brains haven't seen the end of this; mark my words! One day I'll be back to rip each and every one of you to shreds, and you'll be sorry you that ever messed with DayClan. You'll be sorry that you ever messed with me!" Then she tore herself free from the horde of angry warriors and sprinted away from the camp, leaving her Clanmates behind. The grass rustled for a few heartbeats where the DayClan leader disappeared, then stood still. Rainstar was gone.

All around Hailstorm, cheers filled the air.

Flamepaw and Emberpaw glanced at the place their mother had disappeared and, glancing at the DawnClan, DuskClan, and NightClan warriors glaring at them, they turned and fled in the other direction, where the rest of their Clanmates had gone.

Lilyfoot and Fernpaw emerged from their den, eyes wide. "Thank you." Lilyfoot dipped her head to Beechstar, Orangestar, and Eveningstar. "I know it sounds unloyal of me, but I wanted Rainstar gone. DayClan needed her gone, and so did the rest of the forest. She was noble and had good motives in the beginning of her leadership, but her revenge got out of control the longer she held her power."

"I'm sorry for the attack, Lilyfoot, and for injuring your Clanmates and making them flee, but you must understand that what your Clan was doing was not the will of StarClan," Eveningstar meowed to the DayClan medicine cat.

Lilyfoot sighed. "I know. Things like these always mess with morals and emotions. I know it was for the good of the forest; now DayClan can recover and earn back the other Clans' respect. When you leave, I'll have to go and find my Clanmates and pull my Clan back together. It's not going to be easy recovering from Rainstar's brainwashing, but I know StarClan will guide me and my Clan along the way."

Suddenly an ear splitting, heart-wrenching shriek filled the air. Hailstorm's blood turned to ice and he whipped around in fear. It was Rayclaw.

Stormpaw lay crooked and contorted in the grass, which was stained red from her spilling blood. Hailstorm's stomach flipped over.

"Please, Stormpaw! Wake up; open your eyes! I'm here!" Rayclaw wailed. "I'm here. Please... please..." Tears dripped down his face as he fell over in grief. "Oh, Stormpaw. I... What... what am I going to do without you? Please wake up. Please..."

Hailstorm watched in pain and agony. Even though he didn't know Stormpaw very well, his heart broke at the sight of Rayclaw shaking over her lifeless body. Even though just yesterday Hailstorm had tried to attack her for coming into DawnClan territory, pain still engulfed his heart. It was like losing Twigfoot all over again. All this death, all this pain, was Rainstar's fault. She tore families apart, tore friendships apart. And she'd just murdered her own daughter.

Hailstorm closed his eyes as Rayclaw's wailing echoed across the moor. "Oh... please, Stormpaw.... Stormpaw, please..."

Clovertail slowly, wobbly, walked over to Rayclaw and sat beside him. The orange warrior leaned into Clovertail's shoulder, sobbing, while Stormpaw's limp shape laid below them. Sagetail and Bronzepelt bowed their heads at the sight of their son, and many cats from DuskClan, NightClan, and DawnClan closed their eyes in grief.Hailstorm bowed his head too. The battle may have been won, but the pain of losing Stormpaw, Darkkit, Redkit, and so many others at the paws of Rainstar would leave an echo in their hearts forever.

Chapter 16

A soft, rosy glow illuminated the sky in the early morning sunrise. The pale sunlight peeked over the jagged gray horizon and simmered on the few dew-strewn blades of grass dotting the mountain landscape.

Echoheart watched as Whispersong and Bumblefrost emerge from the Cave of Rushing Water, squinting against the waterfall's mist and the bright sunlight. Echoheart blinked as Star emerged a few heartbeats later, silver pelt glowing orange. She held her head high, but her one blue and one green eye brimmed with worry and sadness.

Echoheart stared at the small mountain cat. *It must be really hard to leave behind everything she's ever known to live a completely new life. She doesn't even have anyone there for her that truly understands; her ancestors probably won't follow her, StarClan may not guide and protect her, and the Clan cats may not approve of her when we get home. At least when Whispersong, Bumblefrost, and I left, we had each other and our faith in StarClan as hope of returning... Star has nothing.* Echoheart sighed. *But Whispersong and I will be there for her. We'll help her learn the ways of the warrior code, and maybe StarClan will see her worth as a Clan cat, and they'll protect her just like any other Clan cat, and guide her as she searches for her destiny with the Clans.*

"So... are... are we ready?" Star asked quietly, her voice faltering.

Echoheart pushed her thoughts away and nodded. "I think so."

Even though pity engulfed Echoheart's heart at Star's sadness, excitement was sparking inside her. After nearly two and a half moons, they were finally heading home!

Echoheart turned around as Stoneteller appeared from behind the waterfall. The large brown tabby tom never left the cave, but this was a special occasion; he was coming to see off one of his Tribemates as she left them forever.

"Star," the Tribe leader sighed, "And you too, Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost: good luck. The heartfelt wishes of the Tribe go with you. May our ancestors watch over you, whether they be the Tribe of Endless Hunting or your StarClan, on your path home." Stoneteller paused, then he turned to Star and sighed. "Star that Shines Bright, I want you to remember something: although your path in life won't always be easy, may yours never be broken by hardship. Never lose sight of what's at the end of it, even if you feel like turning back. The path may get steep and hard and painful, but in the end, it will lead you to where you were meant to go. So have faith, Star."

Star let out an unsteady breath and nodded tearfully at the brown tom. She sniffled. "I'll miss you all." She looked at Stoneteller with sadness. "But I *have* to go. I feel a calling in my heart, and I... I must answer it."

Stoneteller nodded in understanding. "The right choices are often the hardest ones. But whatever path you choose to follow, have hope, listen to your heart, and remember that no matter how dark the nights may get, the sun will always rise. Have courage, Star that Shines Bright. Have courage, and you will find home." Then Stoneteller bent forward and rested his muzzle gently on top of Star's head.

Star blinked away tears and licked her Healer's shoulder. She sniffled, turned away from the Cave, and took a deep breath.

Echoheart glanced at Star, then Bumblefrost, then Whispersong. Then she turned her gaze to Stoneteller. She dipped her head graciously, not able to form the words at how grateful she was for the Tribe's help.

Stoneteller blinked, yellow eyes glistening with a thousand emotions. "Good luck, and may the sky light your paths, both on your journey home and when the time comes to face that bear."

Echoheart shuddered but nodded gratefully at Stoneteller's encouragement. She sighed, turned, and began walking down the mountainside along the river, with Whispersong and Bumblefrost behind her. Star soon followed, and Echoheart could feel the young

cat's pain and sadness. Her pawsteps were heavy, but she kept her head high and looked ahead with courage.

Echoheart took a deep breath, glancing over her shoulder. Stoneteller was slowly getting smaller, as was the Cave and the waterfall. Echoheart tore her gaze away and looked ahead at the rising sun, bathing the four cats in its light and warmth.

The long journey loomed ahead, but at the end was DawnClan. At the end was Hailstorm, Sparktail, Rustypelt, and everyone else they missed so much.

At the end was home.

End of Book 4

The story continues in book 5: Looming Darkness

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